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H 9045316

**STUDENT RETENTION: ONE COLLEGE'S ATTEMPT TO DEAL
WITH THE PROBLEM IN THE LIGHT OF RECENT
GOVERNMENT POLICY 1999-2002**

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION (EdD)

2004

EdD Abstract

This study investigates the reasons for, and potential managerial solutions to, the problem of high rates of student drop-out on full-time Humanities programmes at a further education (FE) college in a disadvantaged area of the North of England. As rates of student withdrawal have attracted the attention of policy makers, the research examines the assumptions which shaped the decision to define drop-out as a problem and to use funding mechanisms and the inspection process to penalise colleges which experience higher than average rates of drop-out. A review of the literature indicated that during the last ten years the dominant assumption that influenced the policy response to student drop-out appears to have been informed by research positioned within the school effectiveness paradigm. In particular, the study by Martinez (1995) and Davies (1997) reinforced the view that withdrawal is caused primarily by deficiencies in the quality of teaching and student support. An evaluation of their findings provided a starting point for the investigation into student drop-out at the case-study college.

Having identified serious flaws in the validity of their findings, this investigation, which used a range of research methods, including biographical interviews with students, suggests that withdrawal is caused by a complex combination of factors which are located mainly outside the college. Nevertheless, the study points to the delicate interaction between college-based and external influences on both leaving and completing. Consequently, a number of opportunities to improve college-based practices were identified and incorporated into a series of tentative recommendations for a managerial response to the issue of drop-out. The investigation concluded with an examination of the messages which could be drawn from the findings by those who shape national policy. It contends that the continuation of the current policy is likely to be counterproductive in terms

of retention improvement and could also undermine other priorities such as widening participation.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION: RATIONALE, CONTEXT AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The rationale for the investigation

This study investigates the reasons for, and identifies a potential managerial response to, the high rates of student withdrawal¹ at a further education college based in an economically disadvantaged area of the North of England. The issue of student drop-out has been a major cause of concern in the Further Education (FE) sector since the early 1990s when policy makers began to make colleges accountable for rates of withdrawal following the publication of a report by the Audit Commission (1993), which challenged the view that some 'wastage' was inevitable. As a result of this report, student drop-out was defined as a 'problem', and colleges whose retention rates fell below national benchmark standards faced the consequences of critical inspection reports and funding penalties. Thus the need to address this problem has become a priority for such colleges.

However, while a key purpose of this research is to identify possible solutions to a significant managerial problem facing the college that is in the foreground of this investigation, the study also explores the implications of the findings for the broader policy context beyond the institution. By examining the reasons for leaving in the case-study college and comparing the data with the evidence from the existing literature about this topic, the research considers whether the current policy assumption that withdrawal from FE courses is caused primarily by weaknesses in teaching quality and student support is justified.

While this study is not attempting to dismiss the possibility that weaknesses in teaching quality and support may influence some withdrawals, it does start from the position that the emphasis placed on such factors has been unhelpful and damaging to colleges which are attempting to identify and address the full range of issues affecting a student's decision to leave or

¹ For the purpose of this investigation the terms 'drop-out', 'leaver', non-completer', 'wastage' and 'withdrawal' are regarded as being synonymous with the act of leaving a college course without completing it.

complete a course. By adopting such an approach, this study seeks to make an original contribution to advancing knowledge and understanding about the nature of student-drop-out and the development of a managerial response which is informed by the research evidence.

In particular, this investigation questions the findings of Martinez (1995) and Davies (1997), whose work, as the review of the literature in Chapter 2 will show, appears to have been very influential in reinforcing that policy assumption. The claim for originality is based on the belief that this is the first investigation not only to make a direct challenge to their findings, and to present a critical evaluation of their methods, but to do so by comparing their results with those of a research study in a college which had higher than average rates of withdrawal and had recently experienced a major crisis. The existence of turbulent conditions within the college enhanced the relevance of the research setting, because it presented an opportunity to examine the influence of organisational factors in a manner which is consistent with the logic of Popperian falsification (Popper 1959). Thus, if college-based factors were the key influence on withdrawal as Martinez (1995) and Davies (1997) claimed, then examples were most likely to be found in an organisation which had experienced a major crisis.

To begin this process, this chapter will explain the context of the college where the investigation took place and the rationale for the selection of the research setting. As well as providing an overview of the socio-economic indicators of the area in which the college is situated, this section summarises the radical changes to the management of the organisation that occurred in recent years following a major financial crisis. The presence of such contrasting external and internal factors, both of which could have an important influence on rates of student withdrawal, offered a research setting that appeared to be especially relevant to the issues requiring investigation.

The college context

The case-study college is situated in an area of the North West of England which was ranked 18th out of 354 local authorities in the Department of the

Environment, Transport and the Regions' Index of Local Deprivation for 2000 (DETR 2000). This indicates that the district experiences levels of deprivation normally associated with inner-city areas, despite not being part of a major conurbation.

Within the college, which provides a wide range of academic and vocational FE programmes together with a modest proportion of HE provision, the investigation has focused on full-time students in the Humanities Section. This curricular area was selected as it had some of the highest drop-out rates in the college and had been criticised during Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) inspections in 1996 and 1999 (source withheld to preserve anonymity) because retention rates were below national benchmark levels. Therefore, the action required to achieve an improvement in retention rates provided a valuable opportunity to research a complex issue, and, as the curricular area was, when the data collection began, under the direct supervision of the manager conducting the study, access to staff and students was assumed to be unproblematic.

Furthermore, the programmes of study which had been selected shared a characteristic which was of additional interest. As well as having high levels of withdrawal, the Humanities programmes helped the students who did complete to achieve examination pass rates that were consistently above the national average for all schools and colleges. An independent analysis by Greenhead College (2002) also indicated that by 2001 the case-study college had achieved a value added index of 1.05 for its students' A Level results, which placed it in the leading 10% of all English educational institutions for the difference achieved between entry and exit standards. This is particularly pertinent to this investigation because, if, as the current policy assumption appears to suggest, drop-out is caused primarily by deficiencies in teaching quality and support, it would be surprising to find very high rates of achievement for students who completed on programmes where there were also higher than average levels of withdrawal.

Meanwhile, in addition to operating in area with high levels of socio-economic disadvantage, the college also experienced a period of exceptional instability and change provoked by a financial crisis which came to a head

in 1998. Following a dispute with the main funding body, the FEFC, over financial irregularities resulting from the college's strategic decision to achieve the most rapid growth in the FE sector by franchising the delivery of the majority of its courses to providers based across the whole of England, the Principal and Vice-Principal, together with the entire Senior Management Team and Board of Governors, had been forced to resign. After an investigation by the National Audit Office and the appearance of the Chief Executive of the FEFC before the Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee, an initial 'clawback' of £13 million of misclaimed funding was imposed over a three year period, which, out of an annual turnover of £22 million, represented a very heavy financial penalty. Several months later, in June 1999, 170 staff were made redundant, a figure which represented one third of the college workforce. Then, in December 1999 the college's reputation suffered a further setback with the publication of a very critical FEFC inspection report (source withheld to preserve anonymity) which allocated the lowest grade (5) for Governance and 'unsatisfactory' grades (4) for both Management and Quality. A re-inspection followed and the areas were upgraded (to 3) in November 2000.

Another consequence of this crisis was the appointment of a series of three Acting Principals for periods of 3, 9 and 7 months respectively, before the current permanent Principal took up the post in February 2000, following the selection of a completely new governing body in the Autumn of 1999. During the period between the resignation of the Senior Management Team and the appointment of the permanent Principal, the Acting Principals had managed the college with the assistance of a small group of middle managers who had survived the redundancies in 1999. In such circumstances, priority was given to financial survival and the achievement of cost effective operational management, a trend which continued even after the appointment of the permanent Principal because a further, and unanticipated, 'clawback' of £3 million was imposed on the college in March 2001 shortly before the FEFC was replaced by the Learning and Skills Council. This led to a further round of redundancies during December 2001 when 40 staff, including the manager who conducted this study, lost their posts.

One outcome of the need to improve the operational efficiency of the college has been the new Principal's decision to seek an effective management structure by re-organising the college on three occasions since his arrival in February 2000. This followed a major re-organisation by one of the Acting Principals in May 1999 and a further four re-organisations of the departmental structure which had been implemented by the previous Principal between 1994 and 1998. This history of rapid change, with eight reorganisations of the structure in a period of seven years, inevitably created a climate of uncertainty and a high degree of ambiguity about responsibilities and processes. Indeed, the previous Principal had fostered this view by indicating during his end-of-year presentations to all staff that he believed in 'chaos theory' and that continual radical change was a necessary response to the 'naturally chaotic' external environment. However, as Hoy and Miskel (1989) have observed, the consequences of failing to make an appropriate response to the requirements of the environment can be very serious, whether it is in relation to financial probity or to the achievement of retention benchmarks:

'The price of survival is compliance; organisationswhich deviate too much from the requirements and values of the environment are altered or destroyed.' (ibid p.33)

The research issues and questions

This account of the turbulent recent history of the college provides evidence of organisational issues which could have an impact on retention rates and need to be explored alongside the potential influence of factors in its socio-economic environment. Meanwhile, the assumptions which appear to shape national policy judgements about the causes of student drop-out require more detailed examination. Therefore, the key research issues and questions which emerge from the national policy context and, more immediately, from the college setting are as follows:

1. The rationale behind the policy decision to define drop-out as a 'problem' and the performance indicators used to measure it.

To what extent has the effectiveness paradigm influenced the formulation and implementation of government policy on student retention?

This question, which will be explored via the review of the literature in the next chapter, aims to locate in the wider educational discourse the influences shaping the assumption that appears to be held by policy makers about the primary cause of student drop-out. The analysis will trace the origin of the decision to define drop-out as a 'problem' and will examine the framework, or paradigm, from which the policy response appears to have emerged.

In particular, it will analyse the influence of the school effectiveness paradigm, which is associated with the quantitative measurement of the 'school effect' on the attainment levels of pupils, and operates from the premise that, to a significant extent, underachievement results from deficiencies in the school. Policy makers have tended to derive from its research findings the inference that under-performing schools need to be managed more rigorously and to be subject to greater external accountability by strict monitoring of performance against targets. Its relevance to this study rests on the fact that Martinez (1995), in his research, has drawn on the methodology of the paradigm, together with its ideological framework, and applied it to the issue of student withdrawal in FE colleges.

Therefore, in order to answer the first research question, it is necessary to explore the extent to which the effectiveness paradigm has influenced both the FE research agenda and the managerial policies which can result from its findings. The existing research evidence about student drop-out will then be analysed in order to evaluate the validity of the dominant assumption which appears to inform the current policy position and also to point to factors which require exploration in the case-study investigation.

2. College factors.

To what extent do college-based factors, such as initial guidance and counselling, pastoral support and quality of teaching influence students in their decision to leave?

This question will examine the factors within the case-study college which could influence withdrawal. Particular attention will be paid to the impact of the turbulent recent history of the college and the resultant organisational changes on areas, such as the management of initial guidance and counselling, which could influence rates of student drop-out. Evidence about the quality of teaching and pastoral care will be sought from students via the use of a range of research methods.

3. Influences from outside the college.

To what extent do environmental factors, such as socio-economic background, immediate job opportunities or feeder schools, contribute to drop-out?

While not seeking to deny the possibility of a 'college effect', this question was prompted by the existence of a significant body of literature which suggests that influences from outside the college also contribute to withdrawal. The extent to which these influences are present in the context of the case-study college will be explored by comparing the socio-economic background, previous educational career and personal circumstances of students who complete with those who withdraw.

4. The managerial response.

What are the implications for the design of retention improvement strategies?

By drawing on the results from research questions 2 and 3, a number of proposals for retention improvement in the college will be identified. These will include recommendations at both course team and senior management level. The issues which cannot be resolved within the college, and have policy implications, will be discussed in the concluding chapter.

The arrangement of the chapters in this study

Chapter 2 reviews the literature about this topic and addresses the first research question, while the research design is discussed in Chapter 3. With the aid of insights drawn from the review of the literature, Chapter 4 analyses and interprets the findings from research questions 2 and 3 which form the cognitive framework of the study and shape the development of potential managerial solutions, namely the nature of the balance between college-based and external influences on student withdrawal. Chapter 5 evaluates the research design and considers areas which merit further attention, and Chapter 6 examines the managerial implications of the findings for the college. Finally, the conclusion in Chapter 7 analyses the messages which could be drawn from the findings by those who operate beyond the institution at policy level.

CHAPTER 2 THE REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter will review the literature about student withdrawal in FE colleges. To facilitate cross-referencing of the literature with subsequent aspects of the investigation, the sub-headings in this chapter will follow the order of the four research questions.

The analysis will begin by examining the policy context in which the ‘problem’ of student drop-out was first identified. It will then consider the research evidence about the influence of college-based factors and will explore the means by which a single study by Martinez (1995) became so influential in shaping the assumption held by policy makers and inspectors about the main cause of drop-out. This will be followed by an analysis of the expanding body of literature about the factors beyond the college that may contribute to withdrawal. Finally, the fourth section will draw on literature from the field of educational management in order to provide a framework for the managerial response.

In the process of reviewing the literature, the chapter will address the first research question, which is theoretical rather empirical. Therefore, by evaluating the extent to which the evidence has shaped national policy assumptions about the causes of withdrawal, the review will answer the following question:

To what extent has the effectiveness paradigm influenced the formulation and implementation of government policy on student retention?

The policy context and the effectiveness paradigm

The growing interest in this topic shown by policy makers is clearly reflected in the literature produced by government departments and agencies. Since the publication of the Audit Commission’s (1993) ‘Unfinished Business’, levels of retention in Further Education have been a source of concern to national policy makers. This publication marked a turning point in official attitudes to the problem of drop out: it was no longer inevitable and could be reduced. In the newly incorporated FE sector, the FEFC’s acceptance of this view was demonstrated by the introduction of a financial incentive to keep students. The allocation of each

college's 'on-programme' funding was tied to student continuation measured in three 'census' periods. College retention rates also became the third of the six key performance indicators (PIs) which would drive the grading process in FEFC Inspections. The publication of PIs, inspection reports, and more recently, benchmarking data, created further pressure by extending to the FE sector the 'naming and shaming' practices associated with the more radical champions of the 'school effectiveness' paradigm, who appear to have become the guardians of the 'standards' agenda (Somekh et al., 1999).

Randle and Brady (1997) have described the effect of application of the school effectiveness paradigm to the FE context as the rise of 'new managerialism'. In common with Elliott (1993), Holmes (1993), Avis (1996), Robson (1998), Holloway (1999), they suggest that the 'new managerialist' approach, like the school effectiveness paradigm, is driven by a belief in the need for central control and competition between institutions to achieve cost efficiencies, tendencies which have been apparent in the schools sector since the introduction of the Education Reform Act of 1988. It has been argued that this process has deprofessionalised staff in colleges by reducing their autonomy, via the introduction of new contracts and 'neo-Fordist' working practices, and that:

'Marketization has reconstituted the student as "customer" and encouraged surveillance of lecturers through quality systems and complaints procedures' (Randle and Brady 1997, p.238).

Similarly, research within colleges by Somekh et al (1999) found that the perception held by many non-managerial staff was that the FEFC had used its funding mechanisms and inspection procedures to impose a new managerialist agenda on colleges. A specific example of this process was found in the inspectors' use of quantitative, outcome-based PIs to identify and penalise 'problem' FE institutions which fail to meet national means or 'benchmarks'. The majority of inspection judgements tended to be made on

the basis of quantitative, raw output data without reference to measures which might have given some indication of the peculiarities of the local context or the 'value added' achieved with a particular cohort of students (Barnard and Dixon 1998), although as Myers and Goldstein (1998) have noted, even that type of evidence might not reveal the true level of socio-economic disadvantage in the area. Furthermore, the dominant position afforded to Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspectors by the new Learning and Skills Council (LSC) which replaced the FEFC from April 2001, indicated that the influence of the school effectiveness paradigm on the FE sector was likely to increase (Cartner 2000).

In the context of retention rates in FE, the influence of the 'effectiveness' paradigm appears to have resulted in an assumption among policy makers and inspectors that drop-out is caused chiefly by deficiencies in colleges. The funding model reflects this assumption by providing colleges with a financial 'incentive' to correct this deficiency by retaining more students. The influence of the same assumption is apparent in a report published by the National Audit Office (NAO 2001), which emphasises the impact of teaching and student support on drop-out and makes only brief reference to external factors such as financial hardship. Significantly, the report fails to acknowledge the majority of retention studies discussed in this review: the findings of such studies do not lend support to the assumptions which appear to shape the effectiveness paradigm.

However, the close association of the school effectiveness paradigm with government policy has caused a number of critics, including some such as Goldstein and Woodhouse (2000) who would regard themselves as working within that paradigm, to question its objectivity. They suggest that 'there is a notable lack in the current school effectiveness literature of serious attempts to expose the underlying assumptions that the research is making' (Goldstein and Woodhouse 2000, p360). They also note that school effectiveness research

'has made almost no attempt to contextualise schools within the wider environment. To do so, of course would involve political as well as social and cultural

considerations and it is doubtful whether this would be welcome to government' (p356).

Similarly, Willmott (1999) has expressed concern about the 'distressing blindness' of researchers who are committed to the paradigm, because 'what is distinctly ideological about the research is the ways in which it lends credence to, and informs, policies which place the burden of "improving" schools squarely on teachers' shoulders, thus concealing the reality of structured inequalities that necessarily delimit the extent to which "improvement" can take place' (p.266). Indeed this tendency has been acknowledged by one of the leading advocates of school effectiveness research:

'School effectiveness has sung the policymakers' tune in its emphasis upon how schools can make a difference—indeed we wrote their words.' (Reynolds 1998, p20)

A specific example of the way in which the ideology of the school effectiveness paradigm appears to have shaped official assumptions about the causes of drop-out will now be examined.

College-based factors

The policy makers' perception, that poor levels of quality in teaching and support were the key factors in explaining early leaving, appears to owe much to the well-timed publication of a small case study by Martinez (1995) on behalf of the main government-sponsored research body for FE, the Further Education Development Agency (FEDA). It was well-timed because few studies of student drop-out from FE colleges had been conducted before the issue became a source of concern to policy makers, and, as Elliott (1996) has argued, in comparison to other parts of the education system the FE sector in general had been under-researched. Therefore, in a situation where evidence was scarce a study which reinforced the view that a 'new managerialist' approach was necessary to address the problem of retention was likely to attract attention of policy shapers such as Dearing (1996).

The limited nature of the evidence which was available is apparent in the literature that existed before the appearance of the study by Martinez

(1995). Studies such as Boyce (1958) and Glynn and Jones (1967) had identified the high drop-out rates in part-time Adult Education classes but offered only limited insights into the causes, other than noting the tendency of students who had over committed themselves to depart in the first term. Similarly, the study by Roberts and Webb (1979) was so inconclusive that the authors were reduced to suggesting that Monday was a bad day for part-time classes. Apart from covering only a 'snapshot' of one or two academic years of part-time non-vocational courses, which did not represent the core full-time work of FE, these studies also lacked a consistent approach to question design, making it difficult to compare results and to achieve reliability. Bale (1990) did not offer her respondents the opportunity to identify finance as a cause of withdrawal, while Smith and Bailey (1993), whose national survey of 2170 students on 254 vocational programmes showed that 44 % had withdrawn due to course-related reasons, had not tested for strength of commitment to the course. Meanwhile, Kember (1995) suggests that the validity of such investigations may have been compromised by adopting the 'autopsy' approach, in which the reasons cited by respondents could have been simplistic post-course rationalisations of what could have been a complex combination of factors.

The only study to overcome such problems during this period was the investigation of non-completion at the Isle of Wight College by Medway and Penney (1994), who adopted an approach which Spours (1997) has suggested was 'often thought to be the most methodically sophisticated and multi-causal local case-study' (p.62). As the first study to compare the circumstances of current and withdrawn students via the same quantitative survey and to provide non-completers with the opportunity to respond to open-ended questions about their reasons for withdrawal, it revealed the influence of a combination of organisational, cultural and external factors. In addition to identifying differences between leavers and completers in their levels of satisfaction with some aspects of the college's provision, the research also indicated that many of the former were disadvantaged in relation to the latter, in areas such as levels of commitment to the course and frustration following an unsuccessful search for employment, even before they joined the college. However, as the report of the findings remained

unpublished, the study appears to have been significantly less influential than the work of Martinez (1995).

The approach adopted by Martinez (1995) resembled that of Medway and Penney (1994) in that an identical questionnaire was administered to both current and withdrawn students, but it did not include a qualitative element which allowed non-completers to explain their reasons for leaving. When a sample of 248 completers and leavers was questioned about 35 possible causes of drop-out which applied to them personally during their time at a single London FE establishment the most significant reason which applied more to the latter than the former was the 'college did not care' (Martinez 1995, p.13). Although the leavers constituted 'just under one quarter' of the total sample, or fewer than 62 students, this explanation of drop-out was so effectively promoted, that it appeared under the headline 'Students are quitting "Don't Care' Colleges"' (Nash 1996) in the Times Educational Supplement (TES). Then, shortly after the appearance of this headline, the study which prompted it was the only explanation of withdrawal quoted by Dearing (1996, p.128) in the findings of the main report of his review of 16-19 education. By contrast, the latter made only cursory reference in his main report, via a footnote, to a literature review on completion rates (Sharp 1996), which, apart from being more comprehensive in the range of factors addressed, had been commissioned specifically for his investigation. In her review, which drew particularly on the findings of the unpublished study by Medway and Penney (1994), Sharp (1996) identified the influence on withdrawal not only of organisational and course-related factors but also the impact of employment-related reasons and personal difficulties.

The uncritical acceptance of the Martinez (1995) study, whose findings were drawn from such a small sample of FE colleges, reveals much about the processes behind the construction of 'knowledge' by the gatekeepers who inform national policy making (Palmer 2001a). Simple messages appear to have a powerful appeal, but the reality can be more complex. The findings related to questions asking about 'possible' rather than 'actual' causes of leaving and Martinez (1995) acknowledged that financial hardship received the highest rating as the reason for withdrawal from both leavers and completers. It is notable that, in contrast to the study by Medway and

Penney (1994), and presumably due to a determination to apply tests of significance to all of the responses, the leavers were not asked 'Why did you withdraw?' because that question could 'only be answered by students who have left the course' (Martinez 1995, p.11).

When this survey was repeated with a sample of 413 students in a second inner-city London college by his colleague, Davies (1997), the rather emotive conclusion of the earlier study, that the 'college did not care' (Martinez 1995), was refined to the more academic tone of the following statement:

'The distinguishing characteristic of withdrawn students, compared with those who stayed on, was the relatively lower level of satisfaction of the former group with factors connected with *teaching quality and support*.' (original italics) (Davies 1997, p.8)

However, the majority of the leavers indicated that the college was not to blame for their decision to drop-out. Fewer than one quarter of the 23% of withdrawn students, or less than 6% of the total intake, considered that the college was 'very much to blame' (Davies, 1997, p7) and the majority of the leavers 'did not rate it badly for factors connected with teaching quality' (ibid p.8).

Apart from these apparent inconsistencies in the findings there are more fundamental doubts about the methodological approach in relation to reliability, validity and the extent to which it is safe to generalise from the results. As Oppenheim (1992) has observed, the measurement of attitudes about single factors on an ordinal scale is highly subjective and is likely to be unreliable. Meanwhile, the findings suggest that the leavers, who were in a minority, received an inferior level of service from the college compared to that provided to the completers, who formed the substantial majority of students in both samples, but the differences in responses may have reflected different subjective perceptions rather than different experiences. Thus, validity of the findings could have been undermined by the possibility that different students may evaluate the same experiences very differently. Furthermore, causation cannot be inferred merely because statistically significant differences between the two groups have been identified (Hage

and Meeker 1993; Bryman 2001), and the validity of the 'possible' reasons for leaving could not be corroborated with the 'actual' reasons because the students were not asked for such information. Finally, to seek to draw generalisations about the causes of drop-out from findings based on a combined total of no more than 157 leavers in samples taken from only two colleges, in a sector consisting of over 400 colleges and 3.8 million students (NAO 2001), would seem to be unsound both from the perspective of research practice and for the purpose of informing national policy.

Yet, despite the subsequent publication by FEDA of more cautious findings (Martinez 1997; Martinez and Munday 1998), based on a much larger sample of case-study evidence from 31 colleges, and the work of Barwuah et al. (1997), who acknowledged the need to examine the impact of demographic factors, research conducted within the effectiveness paradigm still appears to be the dominant influence behind the selection of performance measures. Further evidence of the continuing promotion of the effectiveness paradigm can be found in a review of retention research by Martinez (2001) who suggests that for future research on the topic 'something akin to the research framework developed within the school effectiveness tradition is required' (p 11). This review is also notable for the fact that it omits a number of studies, such as Page (1996, 1998), Callender (1999), Kenwright (2000) and Lane and Clark (2001), whose findings do not lend support to the view that drop-out is caused primarily by college-based factors, and that its press release prompted headlines such as 'Drop-out is in the hands of colleges' in the Times Higher Education Supplement (Tysome 2002). Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that the researchers who were responsible for the study of the two London colleges have conceded recently that its influence may owe much to the fact that their work was in harmony with underlying government policy:

'We acknowledge that policy-makers might have been less influenced by our research if its findings had been against the grain of government opinion that the college-sector ought to be capable of raising overall levels of achievement within existing levels of resourcing.' (Davies and Martinez 2001)

Meanwhile, the effects of the influence of this research are apparent in the inspection process. As the previous section on the policy context has shown, and Simkins (2000) has concluded from his comparison of the experience of schools and colleges, the Inspectorate's increasing use of outcome-based benchmarking data to penalise colleges where there are higher than average levels of withdrawal illustrates the continuing dominance of the effectiveness paradigm, with its 'new managerialist' emphasis on productivity and cost efficiency. The inspection process is conducted without reference to the data collected by college staff about the causes of withdrawal and, as Elliott (1993) has argued in his analysis of quality models used in FE, tends to function as a closed system approach. In doing so, it fails to account for the impact of the external environment on retention. Even Dearing (1996), if only in his recommendations rather than the main body of his report, did allow for the potential influence of external factors, such as financial pressures, employment circumstances and personal problems, by suggesting that further research should be undertaken into issues affecting non-completion.

Influences from outside the college

The low weighting applied to external factors by the Inspectorate in the assessment of retention rates (FEFC 1993) was challenged by the growing body of research evidence which demonstrates the importance of influences beyond the direct control of an individual college. What is surprising about that evidence is that several important contributions to the case against existing policy assumptions about drop-out were sponsored by the FEFC. Two in particular, Kennedy (1997) and Callender (1999) drew attention to the link between deprivation and an increased risk of non-completion.

Socio-economic disadvantage

The Kennedy Report (1997) on Widening Participation recognised the importance of exploring the impact of contextual factors on outcomes such as retention levels. She pointed to the risk of higher drop-out as a consequence of attempting to attract a wider range of students by acknowledging that "FEFC data show links between poor levels of retention and achievement, low income and living in areas of social and economic disadvantage." (Kennedy 1997 p62). In an accompanying volume (FEFC

1997), her Committee recommended the use of postcodes linked to the Department of Transport, the Environment and the Regions' Index of Local Deprivation (DETR 1998) as a means of identifying disadvantaged students. Although the FEFC acted upon this proposal by introducing a widening participation factor in its 1998 funding model, it continued to measure the effectiveness of this policy by comparing a college's performance with benchmarked outcome data which was differentiated by context only in extremely deprived districts where more than 50 % of students are drawn from disadvantaged postcode areas (FEFC 2000). Thus, a much higher proportion of students qualified for widening participation funding on the grounds of socio-economic disadvantage than was acknowledged in the benchmarking of retention and achievement data.

Similarly, after an initial study had demonstrated that financial aid for FE students was 'totally inadequate' (Herbert and Callender, 1997 p.xv), further FEFC-sponsored research by Callender (1999) showed that hardship had prompted nearly a quarter of all students in her study to consider dropping out. Her nationally representative sample of 1000 FE students also indicated that financial hardship had a more insidious influence in that it affected students who are apparently retained. She found that over one third of students thought that financial difficulties negatively affected their academic performance, and their studies had suffered due to the need to take on part-time paid work, resulting in a large minority rejecting the idea of remaining in education. This failure to progress upon completion of a course is not formally recorded as a withdrawal and illustrates the overall methodological difficulty of defining and measuring non-completion accurately.

It is significant that, in common with the findings of the Kennedy Report (1997), this study appears to have influenced policy making to the extent that the FEFC has provided additional funding to support disadvantaged students. Callender's (1999) recommendations resulted in the introduction of Educational Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) on a means-tested basis for 16 year old school-leavers who wish to stay in full-time education in a number of pilot areas. Paradoxically, however, the criteria in the Common Inspection Framework (OFSTED 2001) used currently by the body which

succeeded the FEFC continues to indicate a reluctance to accept that drop-out can be influenced by external factors such as financial hardship.

Feeder schools

Another factor beyond the direct control of a college which can influence withdrawal is the attitude of staff at the feeder school. Page (1996) found that there was considerable variation in rates of retention between her college's 14 feeder institutions, with the academically most successful school producing the highest proportion of college withdrawals. Pupils from this school were four times more likely to withdraw than students from some of the other feeder establishments. This school viewed the local FE college as a 'dumping ground' for pupils who did not fit into the traditional academic culture. The school appears to match the formal type 'A' culture, described by Hargreaves (1997), where the emphasis on social control may have left students with a low level of self motivation and a high degree of external attribution, creating a situation in which, after moving to the FE sector, they believe that the 'lax' regime in the college was to blame for their failure to complete the course. Similarly, the application of Tinto's (1975, 1993, 1997) model to this example suggests that there was a low level of 'normative congruence' because there was a poor 'degree of fit' between the expectations of the students and a college which had a different culture to that of the feeder school.

It is clear that Page's interview with the school's deputy head revealed an emphasis on discipline and control : "there is a very regimented system here and they are checked on regularly" (1996, p118). The school only sent pupils to the college for negative reasons such as 'kicking against' the school. This problem appeared to be deep rooted. Staff in the school were largely ignorant of what the college offered and held an elitist disdain for it, regarding it as a place for failures and losers. Ill-informed staff interacting with pupils for five years had ample opportunity to transfer their negative attitudes, and in doing so, may have contributed to future college withdrawals and to the creation of a self fulfilling prophecy. By contrast, staff in 'school 14', situated at the other end of the academic spectrum, had a good relationship with the college and were very knowledgeable about its programmes. Significantly, this school provided the fewest college drop-

outs. This raises the question of whether colleges should be held accountable for the actions of hostile schools who hinder the progression opportunities of their students.

Student disposition

The 'new managerialist' approach to the assessment of retention rates appears to rest on the assumption that all students enter college with the aim of completing their courses. Research evidence does not support this view. Categories of drop-out identified by Page (1998) include the 'opportunists', who enrol because they have nothing else to do and leave when a better opportunity, such as employment, appears. As a group they appear to resemble the 'choice avoiders' or 'unstable choosers' (Ball et al, 1998), who often drift into post 16 education because opportunities for employment are not immediately available in the local labour market. Similarly, in the Isle of Wight College, Medway and Penney (1994) found that early leavers expressed substantially less commitment to the courses than current students. The percentage of leavers who enrolled because they were unable to obtain a job was more than double that of completers. Meanwhile, student motivation was also identified as a key variable in the case study of retention improvement at Knowsley (Martinez 1996), with the result that the college has since developed staff training programmes in motivational interviewing, a technique based on counselling strategies initially developed with drug addicts by Miller and Rollnick (1991). Thus variations in student commitment on entry to a programme cannot be factored out of the explanation of a college's retention rates.

This is particularly evident in another of Page's categories, the 'consumerists', who never even become students in their own terms, because when they enrol they are buying a product which can be dispensed with as soon as they have gained the skill or knowledge they require. Such students do not share the funding body's definition of a successful completion, but, nevertheless, appear to be satisfied with the college product, prompting Page (1998) to observe that:

"If education is going to be 'market forces' driven, as it appears to be today, then colleges should not be surprised

that some of their ‘customers’ are buying their product and just like consumers in other retail outlets, they resent any interference in what they choose to do with that course/product.” (p.100)

However, the most fundamental challenge to the view that drop out is caused chiefly by deficiencies in classroom and college processes is provided by qualitative research conducted over a four year period by Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997, 1999; 2000a, 2000b; Hodkinson and Bloomer 2000a, 2000b, 2001). Although their original focus had been to explore the transition from school to college, they recognised as the research progressed that their approach was especially relevant to the exploration of the issue of student drop-out. In a longitudinal study which followed a diverse cohort of students as they progressed from year 11 in a number of schools to post-16 programmes in a range of FE institutions, the authors note that their methodological approach had an important impact on the insights derived from the study:

“if this research had been structured around a single snapshot of the sample institutions with one-off student interviews supplemented by interviews with tutors and other staff, reinforced by observations..... it would have foregrounded classroom practice and the inter-relationships between students, peers and teachers, within an institutional culture.” (Bloomer and Hodkinson 1999, p109)

By rejecting that restricted approach, the authors were able to explore issues which have been marginalised in some of the institution-based studies. In particular the examination of the development of learning careers over time (Bloomer 2001; Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000a, 2000b) or the impact of influences from outside the college have demonstrated the complexity of the problem of drop-out and the folly of attempting to identify a common cause.

They assert that young people develop dispositions to learning as part of their habitus, a concept drawn from Bourdieu (1977), who, while emphasising the impact of structural position does, nevertheless, allow for action resulting from individual agency. Bloomer and Hodkinson found that:

‘Any learning which takes place in FE is as much the result of the students’ actions, dispositions and learning careers as it is of the resources of the college and the activity of the teachers.’ (1997, p86)

As life experiences change so do dispositions, a process which can result in sudden or gradual ‘transformations’ and apparently whimsical decisions to leave. These transformations can occur even before the students have reached FE and are very common: over half of the sample had changed their intended courses between the final term in school and the first term in college. Although the in-depth interviews were less than twelve months apart, even the authors, who felt that they knew the members of their sample, were surprised by the unpredictable instalments of the students’ learning careers. From this evidence they concluded that even the most sensitive college guidance and delivery systems would not have prevented some of these changes.

In this context a mechanistic approach to the measurement of effectiveness, which appears to be a feature of ‘new managerialism’, may fail to capture the complexity of students’ learning careers. Bloomer and Hodkinson suggest that the learning process

‘cannot be regarded as something that is easily manipulable by a system of controlled inputs and measured outputs. Nor can it be treated as attainable through some simple matching of opportunities to stable disposition.’ (1997, p87)

When the learning process prompted some of the individuals in their study to choose alternative directions for their learning careers, the changes resulting from this personal development were viewed by the students involved as ‘not mistakes but sources of celebration’ (1997, p88). In these circumstances, the decision to withdraw and interrupt their learning to

pursue some work experience might have been the most appropriate course of action for the students.

The managerial response

The previous section has demonstrated that a body of research evidence now challenges the view that student drop-out is caused chiefly by deficiencies in the quality of teaching and support provided by colleges. This suggests that the 'new managerialist' tendency to penalise a college which does not achieve the benchmarked standard is unlikely to make a constructive contribution to the reduction of drop-out in establishments where external factors have a significant influence on retention rates.

To address this issue, Somekh et al (1999) identified a need to move away from 'new managerialism' of the effectiveness paradigm towards the improvement paradigm by increasing staff ownership of the problem and providing opportunities to participate in the design of solutions. In contrast to the effectiveness paradigm and its association with quantitative measurement of outcomes and the close monitoring of performance by external agencies, the improvement paradigm tends to promote a collegial, collaborative approach which concentrates on the qualitative analysis of process and is professional rather than managerial in style (Reynolds 1997).

Nevertheless, some critics, such as Slee et al. (1998) and Ousten (2003), do not distinguish between the two paradigms because they regard both as operating within the 'engineering' model (Finch 1986) of educational research, which they associate with the production of evidence to support rather than challenge centrally-devised policy. The growing recognition among the leading academic exponents of the previously competing paradigms that there are considerable benefits to be derived by forging stronger links between the two approaches (Reynolds et al 2000; Hopkins and Reynolds 2001) would appear to support this interpretation. However, there are aspects of the improvement paradigm that are closer in character to the 'enlightenment' model, which seeks to illuminate educational issues by studying them intensively and in context but does not attempt to offer immediate solutions. It is frequently associated with the action research

approach and in its more critical forms, such as that advocated by Carr and Kemmis (1986), it can provide insights which challenge existing policy.

Elements of the enlightenment model are apparent in the work of some of the most prominent representatives of the school improvement paradigm, who advocate the maintenance of a degree of independence from policy makers:

‘The current pressure for reforms from outside the school makes this a particularly opportune time to reconsider the school’s vision, as without deliberate action from the inside to safeguard its own values and priorities there is a real danger that external forces will drive the school.’

(Ainscow et al. 1994, p.99)

They also recognise the importance of conducting a detailed study of the context when they observe that ‘researchers and policy makers may have very clear strategies for change and improvement, but unless they connect with an understanding of the realities of teachers this increasing clarity at the top will only increase incoherence at the bottom’ (Hopkins et al. 1997, p.7).

This need to understand these realities was clearly illustrated by the study conducted by Gleeson and Shain (1999) on the impact of managerialism and changing conceptions of professionalism in FE colleges (also Shain and Gleeson 1999, Gleeson 1999, 2001). They found that, despite the attempts of policy makers to reform the FE sector following Incorporation in 1993 ‘corporate managerialism is neither as complete or as uncontested as it is sometimes portrayed’ (Gleeson 2001, p.194). Interviews with senior managers in five FE colleges revealed considerable unease about the effectiveness of the new managerialist model in delivering change:

‘the assumption that senior managers passively accept the corporate line, despite working within it, ignores their experiences and interpretation of educational reform as it affects their working relations with staff’ (ibid, p188).

Similarly, Gleeson and Shain (1999) found that middle managers practised strategic compliance, or ‘a form of artful pragmatism’ to protect their staff from some aspects of the managerialist culture and to ensure that

‘educational values were promoted’ (p.488), a subtle form of resistance which was also found in a university department by Hellowell and Hancock (2003).

This type of resistance has important implications for the professionalism of both managers and tutors in FE. By finding that ‘patterns of deprofessionalisation go hand in hand with patterns of professional reconstruction’ Shain and Gleeson (1999, p.445) presented evidence to suggest that Randle and Brady (1997) were only partly correct when they had argued that new managerialism had been accompanied by deprofessionalisation of the sector. The professional reconstruction identified by Shain and Gleeson (1999) was based on a reworking of residual elements of public sector professionalism within the new conditions of the FE sector and illustrates the distinction made by Ball (1994) between policy as ‘discourse’ and policy as ‘text’. Thus, as active social agents, staff do not simply receive managerialist policy statements from government departments (discourse) as empty vessels but filter and change it through their professional ideologies by interpreting it as a text.

Such subtle forms of resistance can be applied not only to external forces for change but can also be found within an organisation. As Cohen and March (1989) found when studying the operation of an American university, the complexity of large organisations can result in a high level of ambiguity, especially during periods of instability. When this occurs there can be an ‘organised anarchy’ of interests where some groups can use the ambiguity of a ‘loosely coupled’ (Weick 1989) organisation to resist change, especially if it is presented in a managerialist discourse which conflicts with professional values. Such concepts appear to be particularly relevant to an organisation, such as the case-study college, with its recent history of extreme turbulence following a major crisis.

Thus, the literature suggests that the development of a managerial strategy for retention improvement which relies less on the ‘effectiveness’ paradigm and is shaped more by the improvement or enlightenment models would have a number of potential benefits. These include helping to develop institutional capability to respond to the problem of drop-out by creating an

active consensus between tutors and students about realistic solutions (Spours et al, 1997). In recognising and drawing on the professionalism of staff by introducing a 'user-focused collegial culture' the process would also avoid the situation in which

'clinging to the life-raft of TQM and systems approaches to quality assurance to satisfy key performance indicators provides a reassuring but deceptive and somewhat dangerous short-term resting-place for those with a real concern for quality.' (Holmes 1993 p.7)

Furthermore, it would be consistent with the lessons gleaned from the management of change literature (Fullan 2001), which suggests that a participative approach to problem solving is more likely to elicit a co-operative response to the identification and implementation of solutions. Similarly, it would circumvent the practice of trying to reduce complex problems such as drop-out to simplistic generalisations based on raw outcome-based performance indicators (Bloomer and Hodkinson 1997; 1999) and would move from a culture of blame to a more process-based, problem-solving orientation.

Finally, such an approach to the development of a retention improvement strategy must acknowledge one of the fundamental insights revealed by the literature in this chapter:

'non-completion is best understood as involving complex interactions between college provision and external factors. The balance and the relationship between the two varies considerably from person to person and even from place to place and time to time, in ways that are partly idiosyncratic.' (Hodkinson and Bloomer 2001 p.134)

Thus, the effectiveness of the management response sought by research question 4 is likely to be dependent on the extent to which these complex interactions between college-based and external influences have been addressed.

CHAPTER 3 THE RESEARCH DESIGN

The relationship of the literature review to the research design

When addressing the first research question, the literature review in Chapter 2 indicated that the effectiveness paradigm, which supports the extensive use of quantitative performance indicators (PIs), has exercised a strong influence on the formulation of government policy relating to student retention in FE. This 'new managerialist' approach had tended to locate the causes of student drop-out inside colleges. However, the review also showed that evidence drawn from the qualitative or interpretive tradition (Page, 1996, 1998; Bloomer and Hodgkinson 1997, 1999) had questioned the validity of these assumptions and suggested that the external environment, or 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1977), can influence a student's decision to withdraw from a college course. Thus, an understanding of the interface between the second and third research questions is essential: to what extent is drop-out linked to college and/or external factors?

To examine this interface, focus groups and interviews with both staff and students, together with longitudinal biographical interviews with a small sample of individuals whose circumstances suggested that were most likely to leave, gathered qualitative data about both college and external influences and were used to analyse the extent to which the factors interacted. Meanwhile, quantitative evidence was collected via an induction survey about the students' socio-economic background, an area which has been overlooked by much of the existing literature. Recommendations for the management solutions sought by the fourth research question emerged, not only from the review of the literature and the analysis of the data collected in response to the second and third research questions, but also from an evaluation of the effectiveness of the operation of the 'at risk' system shown in Appendix 2, which was designed to involve the tutors in the development of strategies to retain the students they have identified as being most likely to withdraw. Reference was also made to a variety of secondary sources such as the 'official', single-cause reason for leaving and the A Level

Information System (ALIS) value added data supplied by Durham University (2002), which provided an opportunity to explore potential links between prior attainment, motivation and rates of withdrawal.

The research population

As the introductory outline in Chapter 1 indicated, the Humanities area was selected as the focus of this study because it presented a number of characteristics which appeared to make it particularly appropriate for an exploration of student drop-out. Firstly, with an overall drop-out rate which was among the highest in the college, these courses required management action if they were to achieve the funding body's target of 85% retention and thereby avoid unsatisfactory grades in future inspections. Secondly, the research site was potentially significant beyond its immediate context because the co-existence of high rates of achievement and higher than average levels of withdrawal within the same programme, especially in a college with a recent history of extreme turbulence, appeared to be a situation which challenged the adequacy of the policy assumption that drop-out is caused primarily by college-related factors. Finally, as the curriculum area was managed by the researcher, the assumption was that access to staff and students would be negotiated without major difficulties.

However, access to some of the students proved to be more problematic than had been anticipated. The students who formed the research population were drawn from those who were enrolled on full-time programmes delivered by Humanities Section of the college during the three academic years between 1999-2002. While access to all of the full-time students on the A Level and GCSE programmes was agreed without difficulty for the duration of the investigation, serious opposition was encountered when the co-operation of staff outside the Section was required in order to extend the research population.

As most of students on the A Level and GCSE programmes were in the 16-19 age group, it had been the intention to include the full-time, Humanities-based Access to HE students in order to increase the proportion of mature students. In contrast to the A Level and GCSE programmes, which were tutored and co-ordinated by staff drawn entirely from the Humanities

Section, responsibility for the college's Access to HE provision was held jointly between staff from the Humanities and Science Sections. Nevertheless, it had been assumed that, as the responsibilities of the manager who conducted this research had been extended immediately before the investigation began from Head of Humanities to Head of Humanities and Sciences, access to students based in his department was unlikely to be denied. However, staff from the Science Section objected strongly to the proposal to approach members of the Access programme on the grounds that the questionnaire was 'too intrusive', the 'at risk' procedure was unethical and that they wished to develop their own solutions to the problem. Such was the strength of their opposition, that some Science tutors threatened to use their subject classes to advise students against co-operating with the research.

While the grounds for their opposition and the managerial implications will be analysed later, the effect was to delay the inclusion of Access students in the research population until the final year of the investigation. Even this late addition to the research population was achieved only by negotiating with Science tutors who had been appointed to their posts by the researcher in the intervening period.

Towards the end of the data collection period, access to both staff and students was further threatened by the sudden redundancy of the researcher as part of a 'downsizing' exercise. At the start of the investigation it had been planned to complete the data collection by June 2002 in order to allow sufficient time to analyse and present the findings in September 2003. However, when the researcher was given four days notice to leave his post in December 2001, this schedule appeared to have been cut short, until the intervention of his regional union representative secured a settlement which involved the right to continued access to students, tutors and support staff and the opportunity to maintain contact with them via a part-time teaching contract until June 2002.

Having considered the relationship of the literature review to the design of the investigation, the nature of, and rationale for, the selection of the

research population and the barriers to access that had to be resolved, it is now appropriate to examine each of the methods in greater detail.

The induction survey

On entry to their programmes of study all members of the survey population completed a questionnaire, a copy of which is shown in Appendix 1. The aim in collecting the survey data was to examine whether patterns could be identified among the complex nexus of variables which can shape a student's habitus (Bourdieu 1977), or cultural and socio-economic setting. Evidence from the survey also served to prompt some of the issues discussed in the subsequent focus groups and interviews. As 100% of completers and leavers responded to the survey during induction, before drop-out could occur, it was possible at the end of the academic year, after all of the withdrawals had occurred, to compare aspects of the habitus of the two group of students.

The questions in the induction survey related to the issues raised in the review of the literature in Chapter 2 and included:

- prior attainment (Audit Commission 1993);
- attitudes to school experience and the influence of the feeder school (Page 1996, 1998);
- the occupational background of parents and mature students to determine social class background (UCAS 1999);
- knowledge of parental educational achievement and age on leaving school as an indication of the level of discourse about education in the home and the knowledge or 'cultural capital' available to assist with homework (Bourdieu 1977);
- level of parental support for education (eg number of books in the home and attendance at parents evenings – loosely based on Douglas (1964) and Plowden (1967), but as an indication of 'habitus' rather than the largely discredited cultural deprivation thesis);
- family structure and unpaid responsibilities in the home (Barwuah et al 1997);

- affluence measures - housing tenure, benefit entitlement, car and computer ownership (Kennedy 1997, Herbert and Callender 1997; Callender 1999);
- the extent of part-time paid work undertaken (Barwuah et al 1997, Martinez and Munday 1998);
- motives for joining the course, a question which aimed to provide an indication of the extent to which the qualification was part of a logical progression route; Medway and Penney (1994) found that students who had joined the course because they were unable to obtain a job were prone to dropping out when employment became available;
- level of commitment at the start of the course - here, Weiner's (1979) thesis about the importance of internal and external attribution within motivation theory is relevant.

Piloting of the induction survey revealed that students had not experienced cognitive difficulties when completing the questions and confirmed the value of having tested and amended earlier versions of the questionnaire. However, when the pilot results were presented to members of the teaching team via a focus group, the analysis revealed a gap in the data which indicated that there was a need to ascertain whether a student's history of early withdrawal from previous courses might increase the risk of drop-out from subsequent programmes of study.

The need to make this change also prompted reflection about the utility of the existing questions. As Moser and Kalton (1971) observed:

‘It is obvious that the survey planner must rigorously examine every question, and exclude any that are not strictly relevant to the survey's objectives. In this, the pilot survey is his most helpful tool.’ (pp.309-310)

To avoid extending an already lengthy questionnaire, and thereby risk testing the patience of respondents to the point where the quality of the answers could be threatened, a decision was taken to remove any questions which had not yielded useful data. It was found that a question about students' preferences relating to working on their own or in groups had not distinguished between their experience of learning in any meaningful manner. Consequently, this was replaced with questions 20 and 21, shown

in Appendix 1, and two other separate questions about previous experience of using a computer were rationalised by bringing them together into a two-stage structure within a single question (22a and 22b).

After the completion of the pilot process, the appointment of several new members of staff to the core team of tutors who were to administer the induction survey served as a useful prompt to arrange a meeting of the whole team to reiterate the aims and purpose of the research and to seek confirmation from the existing members of their continued commitment to the implementation of the methodology. This strategy was informed by the management of change literature, and, in particular, by Fullan's (2001) observation that a participative approach is more likely to result in a commitment to a commonly owned solution, an insight which has proved to be a guiding principle of the methodological approach adopted in this study. This not only aimed to promote ownership, but also, by drawing on the knowledge and understanding of staff who were familiar with the context, it sought to identify improvements in the research design.

As the review of the literature in Chapter 2 showed, this approach is consistent with the conclusion drawn by Somekh et al (1999) who identified a need, when analysing complex issues, to move from the new managerialism of the effectiveness paradigm by increasing staff ownership of the problem. This approach recognises that staff may have insights into the problem which are not immediately accessible to outsiders and, in return for drawing on their knowledge, it offers them a form of continuing professional development.

The 'at risk' procedure

This element of the research design, which is shown in Appendix 2, asks tutors to identify, via 'Form 1', and track the progress of students who are deemed to have a high risk of leaving before completing their programmes. These judgements are based on a set of 'at risk' criteria, listed on the first page of Appendix 2, and are intended to prompt the provision of additional pastoral and academic support in order to prevent withdrawal. Such support is recorded on 'Form 2' and is used for termly analysis during team

meetings with other tutors. It is also stored as evidence of student support, which subsequently can be presented to inspectors. If the intervention is unsuccessful and the student withdraws, the tutors are asked to interview the students and to record a qualitative response on 'Form 3', which seeks to provide much clearer insights into the often complex combination of reasons for leaving. This technique aims to offer significantly more data about the cause(s) of leaving than the existing single-reason categories currently used in most FE colleges (shown in 'Form 5'), which are based on a Department of Education and Science/ Welsh Office (DES/WO 1987) classification produced before the issue of retention became a major source of concern to policy makers. At the end of each academic year tutors are asked to analyse the effectiveness of the procedure with the aid of 'Form 4' and to reflect on the trends.

The data produced by the 'at risk' procedure were compared with evidence drawn from the other methods used in this study as a test of internal validity. In doing so, it offered the opportunity to investigate the perceptions held by staff about the causes of drop-out and the possibility of their (unintended) contribution to the problem. By requiring a detailed account from each tutor of the student's reasons for leaving, 'Form 3' was also designed to counter the possibility, identified by Martinez (1995), that the increasing use of performance indicators by college managers and the Inspectorate can encourage a tendency among tutors to avoid culpability by recording a cause of withdrawal which did not relate to the course.

The 'at risk' procedure was intended to enhance the research design in several other respects. The tutors' identification of students who were deemed to be 'at risk' of non-completion provided a sample for the biographical interviews. However, to avoid the effects of negative labelling, the overall purpose of the exercise was not revealed to the students. Instead, the students were informed that they had been randomly selected to comment on the quality of pastoral and academic support offered by the college. As this was partly true, it was felt that this compromise was ethically acceptable and might avoid the risk of creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. For the same reason, it was believed that this strategy was more likely prompt the students to make a positive response to requests for

continued involvement in the research after they have withdrawn, than if they had been encouraged to believe from the start of the course that they had a high risk of non-completion. There was also the possibility that research attention given to the students might itself contribute to retention improvement by promoting a 'Hawthorne effect' which encouraged them to complete the course.

As the 'at risk' procedure was designed to promote the systematic 'self-reflective enquiry' (Carr and Kemmis 1986) which is associated with action research and distinguishes it from the everyday activities of tutors, it sought to contribute to the development of managerial solutions to the problem of drop-out by drawing on insights from the literature relating the enlightenment model. The fact that the activity is both critical and team-based appears to satisfy the requirement of Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) that:

'The approach is only action research when it is collaborative, though it is important to realise that the action research of the group is achieved through the critically examined action of individual group members.'

(p.5)

Moreover, the aim of improving the understanding of tutors' practices in context by developing strategies to assist students drawn from disadvantaged, 'widening participation' backgrounds to improve their chance of completing a qualification acknowledges the plea made by Kemmis (1993) for the action research approach to maximise social justice.

The biographical interviews

The next stage of the research design was to conduct biographical interviews with samples drawn from the 'at risk' lists submitted by tutors. The main benefit of using this method has been clearly articulated by Erben:

'The object of the biographical method is to provide more insight than hitherto available into the nature and meaning of individual lives.' (1996 p.172)

This quality seemed to be particularly relevant to the needs of this research topic because it provided a means of examining, via the 'narrative' of individual students, the complex combination of influences which can lead

to withdrawal or completion, and it enabled the interviewer to explore the interface between the college-based and external factors. Furthermore, as Scott and Usher (1999) have shown, the biographical method is a hermeneutic process in which the act of research is developmental for both the interviewee and the interviewer. Apart from offering the former the educative benefits of a structured opportunity for personal reflection, the procedure could contribute to the development of the managerial solutions sought by the latter in response to the fourth research question. During the course of a series of longitudinal interviews with each respondent, potential solutions could be discussed in the context of that individual's experience.

In recognising the fragmentary nature of life, with its sudden endings and new beginnings, the biographical method complements the work undertaken by Page (1996, 1998) and, in particular, Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997, 1999), who explored the 'sudden transformations' which occurred when students decided to leave college. Thus, it is necessary to explore student's life outside college as well as the learning within it, and the collection of this biographical data facilitates the exploration of the interface between the two zones of activity. When collecting such evidence Mandelbaum (1982) suggests that, for the purposes of theoretical analysis, biographical data should be more than a simple chronological account and can be organised around the key dimensions of an individual's life as a way of generating categories for understanding the main forces influencing that person. These dimensions can include the biological, cultural, social and psychological areas of life. The analysis also aims to identify the principal turning points and examine the individual's means of adaptation.

With each student, the initial biographical interviews were designed to be non-threatening by focusing primarily on the construction of a chronological account of their educational careers, in order to establish a rapport and to build a frame of reference for the more analytical questions in the later rounds of interviews. The second stage of interviews explored 'turning points' or 'sudden transformations' and sought to evaluate the extent to which education was a priority in the students' lives by probing their response to the question 'What is the most important event which has happened to you during the last twelve months?' In preparation for the third

round of interviews, students were asked to consider the question ‘Which people have had the major influence on key decisions you have made in your life?’ Here, the aim was to explore the nature of the cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1977) that was available and the extent to which it had influenced the student’s learning career. In cases where the third stage was the final interview for respondents on one-year courses, the discussion also covered their reasons for staying or leaving. (For students on two-year courses it was possible to interview them on up to six occasions.)

In contrast to the disappointing response when leavers had been invited to join a focus group, the biographical interviewees who had left all returned to attend a final interview to explain their decision. This was significant because in each case when they left they had failed to contact their tutors or respond to their requests for information despite the fact that the students reasons for leaving were not related to the quality of teaching. It suggests that the process of longitudinal biographical interviews had been notably successful in building a sufficiently strong rapport between the interviewees and the interviewer and that the students wanted to finish the story. All of the leavers indicated that they had found the process revealing and interesting, and even suggested that they would like to meet again after a period of twelve months to continue the story. A similarly positive reaction to the interviews was evident among the students who completed.

A key strength of the biographical method is that the period between each interview provides opportunities for reflection by both parties. It allows respondents to change their life stories. As Roberts (2002) has observed,

‘In a more postmodernist vein, there is recognition that interpretation should be attentive to inconsistency and ambiguities in stories rather than assume one story ...’
(p7).

Similarly, Goodson and Sikes (2001) note that life history ‘is interested in the way people *do* narrate their lives, not in the way they *should*. ‘ (p16)

It also permits the interviewer to explore omissions from the life story. In their own research Goodson and Sikes (2001) have found that:

‘What is left out can be as significant and as telling as what is included - provided researchers are able to discover omissions...(p46).

In such cases the evidence gathered in the focus groups with tutors proved to be an effective way of discovering these omissions and allowed the interviewer, while recognising the ethical need to protect both the source and the subject of the information, to pursue some of these issues very discreetly in subsequent meetings with the biographical respondent. Goodson and Sikes (2001) suggest that in leaving things out the respondents are not necessarily seeking to mislead but are often concerned to ensure that the story they tell is relevant to the research. At this point the researcher is being drawn into the narration by helping to decide which version of the story is ‘correct’ or ‘complete’. Thus, in adjudicating about the content of the life story the interviewer needs to acknowledge the extent to which the final account, or ‘life history’, is her/his construction rather than that of the respondent. Consequently, Goodson and Sikes (2001) conclude that life historians should ‘spell out the influences that may have coloured both the teller’s story and their interpretation of it.’ (p48)

The method of sampling which has been adopted is based on that used by Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997, 1999). The first sample of four students invited to participate in the pilot biographical interviews, followed by the ten students from the main study, were selected on a ‘purposive’ basis in which the theoretical relevance of cases to the research takes precedence over any claim to representativeness. Scott and Usher (1999) note that when this approach is used the research design is considered to be emergent and sampling decisions are made in terms of the developing theory, resulting in a situation in which ‘sampling and theory are understood as dialectical and symbiotic’ (p.71). On the basis of the experience offered by the pilot study the total sample size was believed to offer a sufficiently wide range of cases, while remaining manageable in terms of the time available for a lone researcher to complete the study by September 2003. Meanwhile, Goodson and Sikes (2001) argue that adequacy of sample size ‘is dependent not upon quantity but upon the richness of the data, and the nature of the aspect of the life being investigated.’ (p23)

Figure 3.1: The Biographical Interviews

Name	Programme	Reasons for 'at risk' categorisation	History of previous drop-out?	Reasons for leaving current programme	Reasons for completing current programme
1. Laura	AS/ Level	Family responsibilities	Yes	Medical condition of youngest child	
2. Matt	AS/ Level	Late enrolment and unclear goals	Yes	To start a full-time job	
3. Amanda	AS/ Level	Previous withdrawal	Yes	Illness (depression)	
4. Joanne	AS/ Level	Previous withdrawal	Yes		Support of her English tutor
5. James	AS/ Level	Isolation within the group and family problems	No		Growing dependence on tutors and the college
6. Paul	AS/ Level	Isolation within the group and recent death of his mother	No		Support of brothers who were previous students and involvement in group work
7. Diane	Access to HE	Family and financial problems	Yes		Partial completion due to tutor support and clear progression goal
8. Helen	Access to HE	Financial problems and child's medical history	Yes		Tutor support – flexible deadlines, financial support for childcare, encouragement of friends, involvement in biographical interviews
9. Sandra	Access to HE	Financial problems and frequent absences	Yes		Tutor support over attendance requirement, financial support for childcare, encouragement of friends and clear progression goal
10. Anne	Access to HE	Severe lack of confidence and lack of progression goal	Yes		Sense of achievement, husband's support and desire to set an example to her children
11. Jenny	GCSE	History of disrupted schooling, previous drop-out and unclear goals	Yes		To overcome stigma from previous drop-out and friendship developed with Rachel
12. Rachel	GCSE	History of poor attendance at secondary school	Yes		Encouragement of youth worker friends, supportive friendship (Jenny) and sense of achievement
13. Michelle	GCSE	Bullied at school and anxiety about working with other students	Yes		Sense of achievement and growing independence from mother
14. Mike	GCSE	Low prior attainment, history of absence from school and family problems	No		Sense of independence and greater maturity fostered by college and support from Student Services Department

To aid the collection of the data, both the focus groups and biographical interviews were tape recorded. The ethical requirement of informed consent was observed by obtaining the agreement of all participants at the outset and pseudonyms were used for the names of any students quoted in this study. Outline details of the biographical interviewees are shown in figure 3.1, and summaries of their life histories are presented in Appendix 3.

The focus groups

Focus groups were used with both staff and students. Although the association of focus groups with market research has tended to deter some methodological purists from exploring their use, there has been a rapid growth of interest recently in their application to academic research, a development reflected in the appearance of a number of publications (Morgan 1993, 1997; Krueger 1994; Carey 1995; Smith 1995; Johnson 1996; Wilson 1997; Ottewill and Brown 1999; and Field 2000). Not only do they help to optimise the use of the limited time available to a lone researcher by facilitating research with groups rather than individuals, but the dynamics of group interaction can also be a potentially fruitful feature of the method. Such dynamics may prompt, in a supportive environment facilitated by a sensitive moderator, the release of data, which, through a respondent's anxiety or the absence of the interactive stimulus of other group members, would not have emerged in the more formal setting of the interview. For this method to succeed, much depends upon the sensitivity of the researcher, who, in playing the role of a moderator rather than leader, must subtly ensure that 'informant' control (Powney and Watts 1987) is not so great that cohesion and focus are lost or that one participant dominates. As Barbour and Kitzinger (1999) have observed, the facilitator 'needs skill in balancing keeping quiet with knowing when to intervene' (p13).

Initially, focus groups were also held with tutors from the Humanities team before the pilot stage began, in order to discuss retention issues which could be examined in the research. Then, after data collection commenced with the induction survey, regular focus groups were convened with the same tutors to identify students who had withdrawn and their reasons for leaving. This enabled the tutors to share their knowledge of students' records of

attendance, absence and withdrawal across a range of subjects and to identify patterns and variations for further investigation by personal tutors. Such discussions are valuable because the majority of students in the case-study college leave without informing either pastoral or academic staff. The focus groups therefore provided an opportunity to piece together fragments of intelligence about individual cases in order to improve the validity of the data. This was cross-referenced to the 'at risk' register (Form 1 in Appendix 2) and supported the biographical interviewing process by providing new questions for subsequent interviews. The pooled information also prompted tutors to contact the students and to complete 'Form 3' of the 'at risk' procedure if the withdrawal was confirmed. The reason for leaving was then recorded on the spreadsheet which held the induction survey data of all students. At the end of the academic year this data was used to separate leavers from completers and the process of analysing whether there were socio-economic differences between the two groups could then commence.

The use of focus groups also offered a means of exploring the impact on retention of central college functions such as the Student Services Department. When the initial focus group was convened with the Head of Student Services and her colleagues, a number of key points emerged which opened up new lines of enquiry. This contributed to the research design by prompting a subsequent discussion about broader cross-college issues in the tutors' focus group, and the nature of the issues raised also demonstrated a need to triangulate the evidence by conducting an interview with the Quality Unit team member who is responsible for monitoring the college's retention and achievement strategy. By doing so, it illustrated the value of using this methodological technique with staff groups and, in the process, pointed to important college management issues which needed to be explored in response to research question 4.

With students, focus groups were used in several ways. End-of-course focus groups collected evidence from students who completed their programmes. The reasons for deciding to stay can be as revealing about the relationship between teaching and learning strategies, and the effects of the wider habitus, as explanations for withdrawal offered by students who leave.

Choosing to stay despite having doubts is not necessarily a single 'event', but can involve a series of decisions over a lengthy period. The sample of completers was drawn by selecting randomly names from students who indicated, on a single-sided questionnaire issued in tutorials at the end of the course, shown as 'Form 6' in Appendix 2, that they had considered leaving college. Therefore, the potential by-product of the data from completers was that it could offer insights into the development of solutions to the problem of drop-out.

Focus groups with students who have withdrawn proved to be more difficult to arrange. After convening several small groups of leavers with considerable difficulty during the pilot stage, subsequent invitations to participate at a time which was convenient to the individual were rejected or ignored. As it was unclear whether this poor response rate was caused by a reluctance to return to the scene of an unsuccessful educational experience or merely a lack of any further interest in something which was no longer of importance to an individual, an alternative strategy was attempted. The literature (Krueger 1994) suggests that 'neutral' local accommodation, such as a leisure centre, should be sought to avoid asking early leavers to return to a college building which might have been a source of discomfort or embarrassment. During the pilot this plan was taken a stage further by asking representatives of the local careers service to make the initial contact with the students, and arrangements were made for the use of convenient neutral accommodation during the early evening when a frequent bus service was still available. To compensate students for their time, a popular fast-food outlet was persuaded to provide tokens for free meals.

However, the response rate did not improve. The careers office was unable to contact many of the students by telephone because approximately 30% of the students either had not provided a contact number or had changed to another telecommunications provider since enrolment. Of those who were contacted only a small proportion (15%) made a firm commitment to participate in a focus group, and ultimately only one student actually attended. As a result of this experience it was decided to suspend further attempts to convene leavers' focus groups and to rely instead on contact

with individual leavers through the 'at risk' procedure and biographical interviews.

Secondary data

Reference has been made also to existing college records. These include the single-cause reasons for leaving which tutors are required to submit to the college's Information Services Department. However, as the actual reasons for leaving are often complex combinations of factors, the validity of these data were viewed as problematic and were tested by comparing them to the more detailed accounts provided by tutors on Form 3 of the 'at risk' procedure (Appendix 2) and to qualitative evidence gathered from focus groups and biographical interviews. The need for accurate and valid data to support the retention improvement strategy features in the recommendations made in response to research question 4 in Chapter 6.

Other college records such minutes of meetings, documents from the quality system and the results of Student Perception Of Course questionnaires (SPOC) were examined and helped to shape the issues discussed in focus groups and interviews. In a number of cases the serious inconsistencies found in the documents, resulting from the frequent changes made to the format during the duration of this study, also became an issue in the recommendations for improvement.

Externally-provided secondary data in the form of the A Level students' prior attainment and aptitude scores produced for the college by Durham University's (2002) A Level Information System (ALIS) for value added were used to explore the issue of student disposition and commitment. A low level of commitment can be a factor in cases where students' average GCSE scores fall in a quartile band below their measured ability. This evidence provided a means of examining whether there could be a relationship between underachievement at GCSE and subsequent withdrawal from the college's A Level courses.

Sample size and modes of analysis

A total of 374 students completed the survey in the academic years 1999-2002, but, within that total, only 46 Access respondents from the final cohort in 2001-2002 were included due to the objections raised by tutors in the Science Section before the investigation began. As Table 3.1 indicates, all the students who completed the induction questionnaire were also included in the initial screening stage of the 'at risk' procedure, with the exception of the first 'at risk' cohort, which contained only first year students in order to allow for more effective monitoring at the pilot stage. Thus, an overall total of 330 students appear in the analysis of the 'at risk' data.

Table 3.1 The Survey Population for the induction questionnaire and the 'at risk' procedure

Programme and cohort size: Induction Questionnaire *	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002	Total
A level	75	77	35 * *	187
GCSE	49	43	49	141
Access	-	-	46	46
Total: Induction Questionnaire	124	120	130	374
'At risk' procedure	80 * * *	120	130	330

Notes

- * The cohorts shown in the table represent a 100% sample of the survey population who were due to complete in the years shown.
- * * The A level cohort in 2001-2002 was smaller than in previous years because only the students who completed their programmes by the end of the data collection period in 2002 were included. Thus, the first year students in 2001-2002 were excluded because they did not complete until 2003.
- * * * The total cohort size for the 'at risk' procedure was smaller than that of the Induction Questionnaire in 1999-2000 because, at the pilot stage, only first year A level students were included in the former.

Meanwhile, as Table 3.2 shows, data were gathered from six student focus groups, at the rate of two per year at the end of each academic session. Two annual focus groups were convened with members of the Student Services

Table 3.2: Sample sizes of the biographical interviews and focus groups

Method			
Biographical interviews		Number of students	Number of interviews
	3 interviews for one-year students (1 per term)		
	GCSE	4	12
	ACCESS	4	12
	6 interviews for two-year students who completed (1 per term)		
	A level	3	18
	5 interviews for two-year students who withdrew (1 per term and 1 after withdrawal)		
	A level	3	15
	TOTAL	14	57
Focus groups		Total number of groups	
Teaching team: 1 per term throughout the study		9	
Students who completed: 2 per year with 8 in each group (50% A level: 50% GCSE in first two years then 50% Access: 25% A level, 25% GCSE in final year)		6	
Student Services Team: 1 per year after pilot stage had been completed and had identified issues for discussion with the Team.		2	
TOTAL		17	

Department after the pilot stage had been completed, and termly sessions were held with Humanities tutors throughout the investigation. 57 biographical interviews also took place and individual interviews were conducted with the Student Liaison Officer and the member staff who held responsibility for retention improvement and was based in the Quality Unit.

The qualitative data were analysed by using a thematic approach. For the focus groups, the analysis was guided by drawing on the model shown in Figure 3.2, which was developed by Padilla (1993) for his study of Hispanic

Figure 3.2: Padilla’s analytical model

Barriers	Data Vector
1. Institutional	Admissions process, lack of mentors, lack of student input into academic affairs.
2. Classroom activities	Students’ lack of academic preparation, lack of study skills, delivery styles.
3. External Environment	Cultural differences, lack of family support, lack of social acceptance in Community.
4. Financial	Students’ failure to qualify for financial aid, need to work part-time, lack of money managements skills.
5. Students personal characteristics	Unclear educational goals, lack of self-esteem, ‘unfair world’ attitude, culture shock from lack of ethnic minority students in lessons.

students who had dropped out of an American community college. By using the blank matrix approach devised by Miles and Huberman (1994), key words, or ‘cover terms’ (Spradley 1979), such as ‘barriers’ were mapped into a data vector. These could then be illustrated by examples developed in the focus group discussions. The themes identified through this process were then compared with those emerging from each phase of the biographical interviews. This cross-referencing promoted the development of additional themes for each research method, which were explored and tested in subsequent interviews and focus groups until ‘saturation’ occurred or no further examples were found.

Meanwhile the analytical categories used in the induction survey were determined by the pre-coded nature of the questionnaire. These categories had been constructed from the review of the literature and were summarised

earlier in this chapter. The data were reported in the form of a frequency analysis in order to provide a background description of the socio-economic context of the students' habitus. The particular focus for the analysis was the comparison of leavers with completers. This facilitated an exploration of the extent to which differences existed in the aggregated profiles of the two groups.

The aggregation of data began at the level of each academic programme within annual cohorts, in order to search for differences between courses and years. The analysis then proceeded to the aggregation of the whole survey population. The only differences between programmes which justified separate categorisation were the levels of prior attainment which are reported in Table 4.20 in Chapter 4. The search for differences between programmes was restricted by the absence of data from the Access students in two of the three annual cohorts, the reasons for which have been reported earlier. One difference between annual cohorts, the variation in withdrawal rates, justified separate reporting. The results of this variation appear in the analysis of the 'at risk' data in Table 6.1 in Chapter 6.

With the exception of the qualitative description of each student's reason for leaving recorded by tutors on 'Form 3', the analysis of the data from the 'at risk' procedure (Appendix 2) was, in common with the induction survey, shaped by the pre-coded nature of the questions on 'Forms 4, 5 and 6'. The data were then cross-referenced with secondary sources, such as the single cause reason for leaving which tutors were required to submit to the college's Information Services Department, to test for accuracy and consistency.

The research design sought to create such opportunities to triangulate data during the analysis, with the aim of improving both the reliability and validity of the findings. However, this was balanced against the danger of regarding triangulation as a 'near talismanic method of confirming findings' (Miles and Huberman 1994, p266). As they have shown, while the purpose of triangulation is to test data to ascertain whether independent measures agree, the reality can be the opposite, with two sources contradicting each other. Where such a contradiction occurred it served as a valuable caution

against the temptation to arrive at over-hasty conclusions. The benefit of the cautionary effect that can occur in the triangulation of data was demonstrated in the analysis of the influence of feeder schools on students' attitudes to the college, the results of which are reported in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4 ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF THE FINDINGS: RESEARCH QUESTIONS 2 AND 3

In presenting and analysing the findings from research questions 2 and 3, this chapter focuses on the interface between college-based factors and external influences on withdrawal. This interface provides the cognitive framework of this investigation because it informs the managerial response required by research question 4, which is addressed in the Chapter 6, and offers a means of evaluating the validity of the policy assumptions about the causes of withdrawal.

A starting point for this analysis of the findings was provided by the single-cause 'reason for leaving' data supplied by each tutor. The categories are based on the classification developed by the Department of Education and Science and the Welsh Office (DES/WO 1987), and were officially sanctioned for use in colleges by the FEFC (FEFC 1996). They are the only type of withdrawal data collected systematically by the majority of FE institutions (Martinez 2001), but the categories are problematic because they do not allow for the possibility that a withdrawal can be the result of a combination of reasons.

Moreover, some students would dispute that they had dropped out. Frank and Houghton (1997), in a study of two Adult Education Colleges, found that, in their terms, many students who had been absent for an extended period had not withdrawn and refused to accept the label 'drop-out'. Similarly, McGivney (1996) noted that it is not unusual for mature students to take lengthy breaks, fully intending to return when their circumstances change. Often, this could be two or three years later and therefore such 'interrupted learning' would be well beyond the four weeks' continuous absence which the funding body defines as a 'withdrawal'. Several examples of the invalid categorisation which results from this process were found in this study. Both of the students whose accounts were used to illustrate the use of Form 3 of the 'at risk' procedure in Appendix 2 had apparently 'left', but subsequently returned to the following year of the

same programme. In both cases when the tutor contacted each student after the initial period of four weeks absence the students protested that they had not left but would return 'sometime in the future'.

Although these problems illustrate the difficulty of attempting to achieve a valid explanation of student drop-out, the data need to be examined because they still constitute the official definition of withdrawal from colleges. In an attempt to improve the quality of the data, tutors were asked to identify the reason which had the greatest influence on the withdrawal, whether or not this factor had been the final 'trigger' for the decision to leave. Thus, if a student left to start a job, but the 'real' reason which had prompted this decision was dissatisfaction with an element of college provision, a college-based reason would be recorded. They were then asked to present evidence to justify for each reason for leaving on Form 3 of the 'at risk' procedure (Appendix 2). This process applied to all leavers, irrespective of whether they had been identified as 'at risk'. As an additional safeguard, the researcher conducted an independent verification exercise by contacting a ten per cent sample of students whose reasons for leaving were in the 'external' categories. The absence of anomalies in the reasons reported directly to the researcher by the students suggested that the data presented by the tutors did represent accurately the explanations offered by those who withdrew.

Reasons for leaving

Table 4.1 summarises the single-cause reasons for leaving provided by the tutors. The data indicate that approximately one-third of withdrawals related to employment (joining the armed forces and changing or starting a job) while almost a quarter left for personal reasons. Moreover, the withdrawals relating to employment would have constituted an even higher proportion of the total if the category 'left for financial reasons' had not been used to distinguish cases where students had indicated that their reason for leaving to seek a job resulted directly from financial difficulties rather than entering full-time employment in preference to continuing with the course.

Table 4.1: Reasons for withdrawal given by leavers to their tutors in 1999-2002

Reasons for leaving	%
Joined armed forces	2
Changed job	2
Started a job	30
Financial reasons	6
Illness	13
Moved from area	4
Family/personal reasons	24
Transferred to a different course	9
Took on too much	1
Course too hard	1
Asked to leave by college (misconduct)	2
Left during induction (reason unknown)	5
Unable to obtain a reason (after induction)	1
TOTAL	100

Thus, when the reasons for leaving are separated into college-based and external influences in Table 4.2 the latter amount to more than four-fifths of the total. Moreover, the proportion of college-based withdrawals would have been lower if the definitions used by the funding body had been strictly applied, because transfers to other courses are subtracted from the ‘official’ drop-out figures because the students have not left the college. Similarly, the category ‘left during induction (reason unknown)’ was added for the purposes of this study as it appeared to merit further exploration, but it would have been excluded from the ‘official’ total, which ignores all withdrawals that occur before the ‘first census’ on 1 November.

All of the withdrawal data quoted in this study relate to the full academic year and include the one-week general induction, which in the case-study college occurs at the beginning of September. However, if the withdrawals which occurred before November had been excluded, the overall drop-out rate for the students covered by this study would have reduced by 39% of the total. Therefore the definition of withdrawal used in this investigation was, both in terms of the total number of leavers recorded and the range of ‘college-based’ reasons identified, broader and more searching than that used by the funding body. As the rationale in Chapter 1 indicated, the adoption of such a comprehensive definition for this study was guided by

the logic of Popperian falsification (Popper 1959): if college-based factors influenced withdrawal, the aim was to find them rather than seek to deny their existence in order merely to verify the argument that factors in the external environment are more influential.

Table 4.2: College-based and external reasons for withdrawal in 1999-2002
(Table 4.1 rearranged)

College-based reasons	%
Left during induction (reason unknown)	5
Transferred to a different course	9
Took on too much	1
Course too hard	1
Asked to leave by college (misconduct)	2
Sub-total	18
External reasons	
Joined armed forces	2
Changed job	2
Started a job	30
Financial reasons	6
Illness	13
Moved from area	4
Family/personal reasons	24
Sub-total	81
Unable to obtain a reason (after induction)	1
TOTAL	100

College-based factors

Each of the reasons for leaving which were attributed to college-based factors in Table 4.2 will now be explored. By examining the evidence from the biographical interviews and the focus groups this section will address research question 2:

How do college-based factors, such as initial guidance and counselling, quality of teaching and support systems, influence students in their decision to leave?

As all of the 'college-based' reasons with the exception of 'being asked to leave by the college', which resulted from bullying and violent conduct

outside the classroom, relate in some respect to aspects of initial counselling and guidance (IGC), the analysis will begin with that factor. Two important elements of the student support offered by the college, the attendance monitoring and pastoral care systems, will then be considered because the evidence suggested that the efficiency of their operation was affected by the same organisational ambiguity (Cohen and March 1989, Weick 1989) that was apparent in the IGC process. To complete the answer to research question 2, the investigation moves on to examine the extent to which classroom-based factors, including the quality of teaching, the college culture and subtle forms of anti-social behaviour between students, may have contributed to the reasons for withdrawal

The approach adopted in the analysis of these factors has been informed by the aims of the improvement paradigm (Ainscow et al. 1994) and the enlightenment model (Finch 1986), which were outlined in the review of the literature. Thus, this investigation has not sought, in the manner of new managerialism, to use the data about a student's reasons for leaving to identify, or 'name and shame', an individual member of the college staff who appears to bear some responsibility for a particular withdrawal. Instead, the analysis will examine areas of the college where the trends in the data suggest that aspects of the process may have contributed to past withdrawals and could continue to influence future withdrawals unless a strategy for improvement is developed.

Initial guidance and counselling

As with many aspects of this investigation, it is necessary to refer to the official definition and measurement of student withdrawal to begin the analysis. A notable feature of the current FE funding and inspection procedures is that colleges are held to have failed in cases where students leave a programme without completing in order to start a job, but are not penalised when a student transfers to another course. Indeed, in common with all withdrawals which occur from the first year of a programme before the first census date on 1 November, the total number of student transfers is deducted from the data supplied to inspectors by the funding body.

Yet, as Table 4.3 indicates, it is during the first two months of the course when the highest proportion of withdrawals from the survey population occurred. It is therefore the period when the management of retention appeared to be least effective. The data in this table relate to the Humanities Section but, as an interview with a member of the college's Quality Unit revealed, the pattern was repeated in all other curricular areas of the college, which suggested that the IGC system could have been the common factor.

Table 4.3: Date of withdrawal

Month	%
September	23
October	16
November	13
December	11
January	12
February	10
March	6
April	5
May	4
TOTAL	100

To explore this issue, the categories of withdrawal which relate specifically to this early period in the academic year will now be examined. The category 'transferring to another course' accounted for the highest proportion of college-based reasons for leaving shown in Table 4.2, but completing another course can indicate that staff are sensitive to a student's needs, and, by taking swift action, have achieved a 'successful outcome' for the college as a whole and for the funding body. As Kidd (1999) concluded from her study of students who had faced this situation, 'switching courses often has positive benefits' (p.259). Nevertheless, it can also represent faulty initial diagnosis of an applicant's real needs and result in the problems which are associated with a late start on another programme. Equally, while the students who left during induction, and were 'written out' of the data, may have been poorly motivated because they were present for such a brief

period and did not even reach the first academic lesson, the college needs to be able to determine the reason for withdrawal. The actual cause could have been related to either the guidance offered or to weaknesses in the induction process. Although some very early leavers might be unwilling to respond to a request for information, the absence of a consistent system for attempting to trace the reasons for withdrawal during the induction period is only one example of a number of concerns about the management of IGC which were revealed by research at the case-study college.

While individual biographical interviewees such as Sandra praised the quality of the advice she had received before enrolment because she had been guided towards a programme which was more relevant to her long term career goals than the course she had originally identified, evidence from the focus groups with the Student Services Department revealed serious concerns about a lack of continuity and consistency in the managerial approach adopted by the college. Chapter 1 has already documented the turbulent recent history of the college, in which the loss of the entire Senior Management Team (SMT) in 1998 had resulted in the appointment of a series of three Acting Principals until the present incumbent took up a permanent post in February 2000. During this period of turbulence, rapid and frequent changes were made to many college systems, which often resulted in confusion because each new system had not had sufficient time to embed before an alternative approach was introduced.

A notable example of this problem occurred in May 2000 when the newly appointed SMT decided to suspend the centrally-provided IGC because it was feared that possible delays resulting from a sudden backlog of appointments might deter applicants and prompt them to seek courses at other colleges. This was at a time when the case-study college was trying to demonstrate to its funding body that it was in recovery from the crisis of 1998. Data presented by the Student Services Department indicated that only 434 applicants out of a total of 1617 full-time students who started in September 2000 had been processed by the central IGC system before it was suspended and replaced by a system in which course tutors, who were under pressure from the SMT to recruit as many students as possible, provided the first stage of guidance to new applicants. This measure appeared to have

given a greater priority to marketing and the achievement of enrolment funding targets than to the objective analysis of students' needs.

However, when the centrally-provided IGC system was restored in 2001 the Student Services focus groups identified a further problem, namely that of a failure in communication between different sections of the college organisation, or, as Weick (1989) has termed it 'loose coupling.' Although the Student Services staff were able to identify the study support needs of new students, including those most 'at risk' of withdrawal, they had no direct contact with the newly created Study Skills Department and a number of students may have been lost before any action was taken. Subsequently, problems with the co-ordination of IGC continued in 2002 when curriculum staff were not available in July to support the central admissions process with specialist guidance about the content of their programmes, because the cycle of staff leave had been changed and all lecturers had been required to take their remaining allocation of holidays by the end of that month. An absence of specialist guidance can contribute significantly to college-based withdrawal categories such as 'took on too much' and 'chose the wrong course', and raises managerial issues which will be addressed under research question 4. All of the examples quoted appear to illustrate a high degree of ambiguity and uncertainty about the management of the IGC process and its position in the strategic priorities of the college.

On-programme support systems: attendance monitoring of students

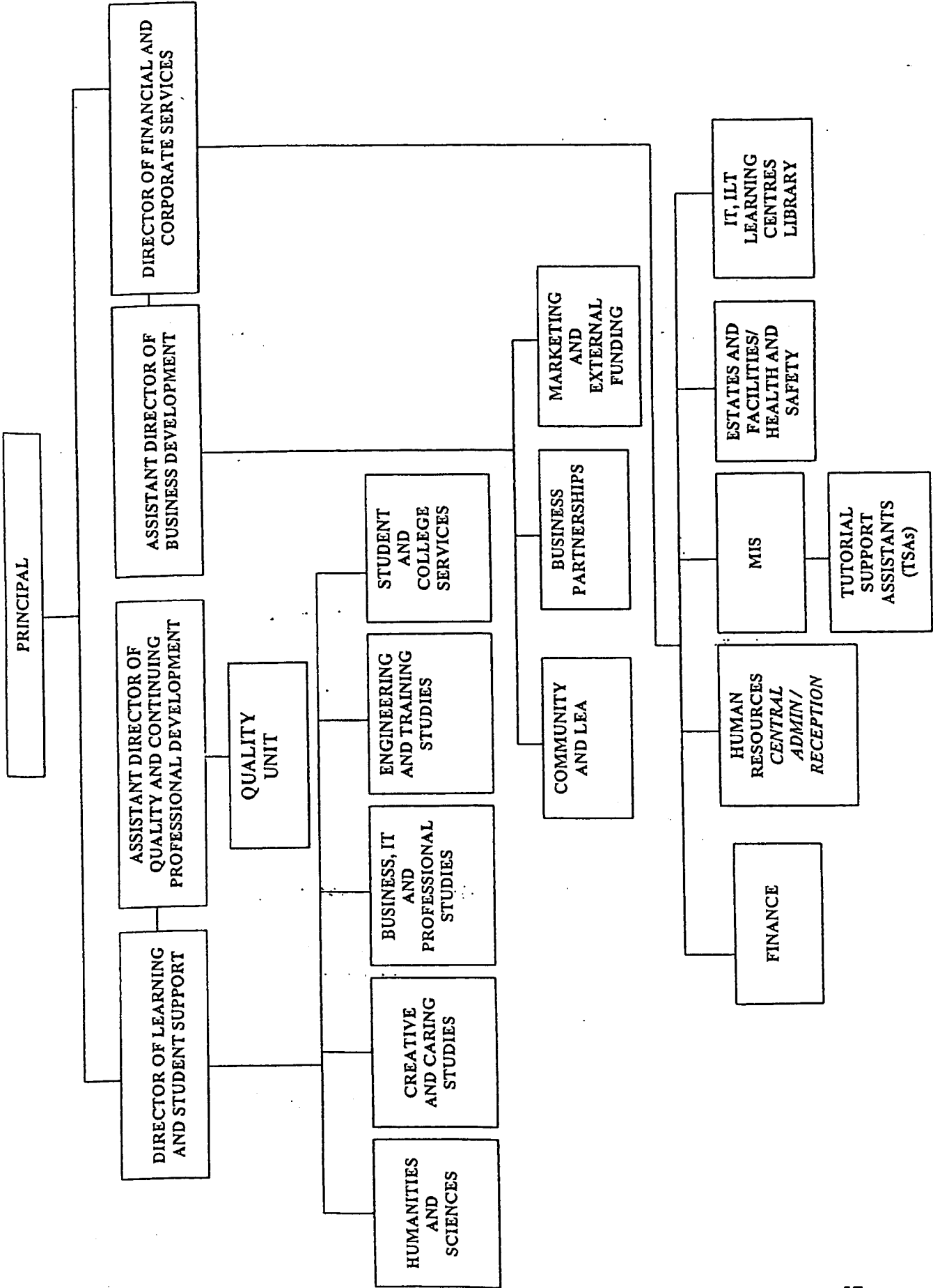
Organisational ambiguity (Cohen and March 1989) in the form of an absence of effective communication between different sections of the college and the confusion resulting from the unco-ordinated implementation of change was also a feature of some of the systems, such as the introduction of the Tutorial Support Assistants (TSAs) in September 2000, which were intended to support students after they had progressed beyond IGC stage and on to their course programmes. With one TSA based in each of the curriculum departments, their role was intended to support teaching staff by monitoring attendance patterns and contacting students who were absent, with the aim of ensuring a swift return to lessons and thereby reducing the risk of early leaving. However, within a month the role had suffered from a significant level of ambiguity resulting from the imposition

of conflicting priorities: as early as October 2000 the TSAs were instructed by the Director of Learning and Student Support, who had devised the role and appointed them only one month earlier, to suspend their direct contact with students in order to concentrate on the preparation of registers. By the time the TSAs returned to their original task in mid-November the role had lost credibility with tutors, because, in the case-study college as Table 4.3 has shown, the highest level of student drop-out occurs in the September-October period.

This role ambiguity was compounded in February 2001 by the TSAs' relocation from the curriculum departments to the Management Information Services (MIS) Department. A further change occurred in September 2001 when the TSAs became Attendance Monitoring Officers (AMOs) and the number of posts was reduced from four to three. The redundancies in December 2001 then removed two of the post holders, leaving the remaining AMO to return to a purely administrative role within the renamed Information Services Department. Throughout the whole period there was no formal line of communication between the post holders and staff in the Student Services Department.

Focus groups with both the tutors and the Student Services team revealed that concern had been expressed by the TSAs that they had never received any training for the role and that there was a considerable imbalance in their workloads because some departments were larger than others. The Student Services team also felt that the relocation of the TSAs from the academic departments to the MIS Department had only weakened an already ill-defined link between tutors and TSAs and had moved the latter even further away from a pastoral role towards a purely administrative register-checking function. They also expressed considerable frustration about the failure to establish any formal line of communication between the TSAs and staff in Student Services, and suggested that it had prevented essential information about students' problems from being shared with other colleagues who were trying to help those individuals. The structural isolation of the TSAs within the college is reflected in their location on the college organisation chart in Figure 4.1, and provides a graphic illustration of their 'loose coupling' (Weick 1989) from other staff who provide student support.

Figure 4.1: College organisation structure from February 2001



Pastoral support: the introduction of Motivational Interviewing (MI)

An interview with the member of the college's Quality Unit, who holds formal responsibility for the promotion of retention improvement strategies, presented a further example of organisational ambiguity and loose coupling in the co-ordination and implementation of a process which had been designed to enhance retention by providing targeted support to students who appeared to have a high risk of leaving. The example relates to the Quality Unit's decision to introduce motivational interviewing (MI) as a retention improvement strategy. This technique, which was described in the review of the literature in Chapter 2, had been used successfully at Knowsley College and is based on the motivational approaches to drug counselling developed by the psychologists Miller and Rollnick (1991). At Knowsley College, which has a similarly deprived catchment area to that of the case-study setting, the technique has helped to overcome the negative impact of factors located in the external environment and has encouraged some of the most apparently demotivated students to complete their courses. The effectiveness of this technique has attracted the attention of more than 20 colleges and has resulted in the development of a training programme based on the Knowsley experience.

In September 2001 this training programme was delivered to 20 staff at the case-study college and received very positive comments from those involved. The timing of the training was deliberate in that it was planned to occur several weeks before the college's peak period of drop-out and therefore was intended for immediate implementation, while the techniques were still familiar to the staff involved. However, by September 2002 only 50 motivational interviews had been conducted in the whole college, and, out of that total, 15 had been carried out by just one member of the original team of 20 who had received the training. This delay in the implementation appears to be due to the Quality Unit's isolation within the management structure and its lack of representation on key decision-making committees: the member of the Quality Unit who is responsible for the promotion of this initiative and the co-ordination of the other retention improvement strategies is not a member of any of the cross-college management committees or the Academic Board.

Quality of teaching

While the reasons for leaving ‘taking on too much’ and ‘finding the course too hard’ may reflect ineffective initial counselling at the interview stage, they can also relate to problems of course management. Students who leave because they are unable to meet the demands of the course may do so because they are disorganised or poorly committed. However, evidence from the completers focus groups suggested that some tutors had set assignment deadlines which clashed with those of other subjects thereby placing particular pressure on students who lack effective study skills and are unable to plan their work. The existence of this problem suggests there is a need to include in the managerial response, under research question 4, recommendations for improvements in the design and phasing of assignments together with the provision of more targeted support in the form of ‘catch up’ workshops for those who have fallen behind.

Although none of the students who participated in either the biographical interviews or the focus groups indicated that they had left or considered leaving due to the quality of the teaching, some had dropped out of individual subjects within the programme. Matt, who was one of the biographical interviewees, had left AS Level Language because he disliked the content and found it ‘too theoretical’ but he did not leave the college until a year later when he needed to find a job to pay the rent on his flat. Meanwhile, Paul dropped out of AS Level Biology for a similar reason but did complete the other subjects in his programme. Both blamed the content of the course rather than their tutors. By contrast, members of the completers focus groups did criticise the teaching style adopted by some subject tutors but stayed to finish the qualification because they wanted to progress to Higher Education:

‘ Our History lecturer just talked to the mature students and had long boring discussions with them during the lesson. He just ignored us.’ (Completers focus group 2)

‘ In Psychology we just sat there while she read through boring handouts. We could have read those on our own at home.’ (Completers focus group 5)

Such accounts indicate the need to explore variations in teaching quality despite the absence of a direct link with withdrawal. To pursue this issue, an attempt was made to identify evidence from secondary sources such as existing college records which might illuminate the research. Lesson observation data from the only external inspection of the Humanities Section which occurred during the period of the study indicated that out of 11 observations, six were assessed as 'outstanding' (grade 1) and the remaining five were classified as 'good' (grade 2). As no lessons were below grade 2 (on a five-point scale), the inspection report concluded that 'high quality teaching' was a 'key strength' of the Humanities curriculum section (source withheld to preserve anonymity). Although, due to his change of role, the researcher no longer had direct access to confidential staff records, an interview with a member of the college's Quality Unit at the end of the data collection period (on 24 June 2002) revealed that this pattern had remained consistent during observations monitored by the College Inspector, which had been undertaken by the Unit in subsequent years.

A number of other difficulties emerged when other secondary data was sought from college records, the underlying organisational reasons for which are discussed in greater detail in the Chapter 6. However, it was possible to compare the retention rates in the five most popular subjects, where a high degree of continuity in the staffing of the courses offered the opportunity to conduct a comparison over the three-year period of the study. Table 4.4 indicates that the main variation, the lower retention rates in the three subjects which are not usually offered by schools, appears to confirm the need identified in the completers focus groups for improvements in the nature of the guidance and information offered to students before they enrol for courses in unfamiliar disciplines. The data also have implications for course design issues, such as the order in which difficult topics are presented, and they suggest that further analysis by tutors of patterns and dates of withdrawal within subjects could contribute to the improvement of pedagogic strategies. The resolution of these issues will be discussed under research question 4 in Chapter 6.

Table 4.4: Retention rates in the most popular Humanities A Level subjects

Subject	3 year average for the period 1999-2002 (%)
English	74
History	74
Media	67
Psychology	61
Sociology	55

The college culture

The biographical interviews and focus groups also identified the issue of the college culture as a potential influence on withdrawal. The nature of this issue was most clearly explained by Mike, one of the biographical interviewees, when he described the problems he had encountered in meeting coursework deadlines:

‘You’ve got to discipline yourself—its up to you whether you do homework. I wouldn’t have come here unless the college had been different from school because I like the way teachers treat you as adults. It’s not as strict as school but I’m used to strict teachers, and so I’m not sure whether it’s a good thing or a bad thing—quite a few people on the course also said that. With people just come out of school the college should push them a bit more. Older people are more capable of doing it themselves.’

He linked this perception of the college culture to the negative message presented by local feeder schools, an impression also gained by many of the members of the focus groups who had also received their secondary education in the area:

‘Teachers at school said that the Sixth Form College would be best because it’s for students of your own age and they will push you. The FE college is for adults and they don’t push you.’

Ironically, it is the perception that life in the FE college is more relaxed than in a school sixth form or at the local Sixth Form College that attracts many of the younger students to the case-study college:

‘I went to the Sixth Form College but I didn’t like it because they treat you like children and so I left and came here.’ (Completers focus group 1)

‘Here you don’t have to call the teachers Mr or Mrs. I really appreciated the freedom at college—it acted as an incentive and made me feel more grown up.’ (Completers focus group 3)

‘There is a mutual respect between students and teachers here but my school sixth form was just like the lower school: they still put you on detention.’ (Completers focus group 4)

This more relaxed culture of the FE college was also regarded as being valuable preparation for life at university:

‘You’re treated like an adult rather than a child at this college—that’s why I didn’t go to the Sixth Form College. Here you can walk in and walk out of college at your own discretion but at the Sixth Form College you had to be on site from 9 to 3 and they used swipe cards to check up on your movements. The system here is what college is supposed to be about and it’s good training for what university will be like.’ (Completers focus group 6)

Nevertheless, one student recognised that, while this culture suited completers such as herself, by helping to raise her expectations, other students might be unable to adjust to the freedom which exists in a more adult environment:

‘The relaxed atmosphere can lead to some students falling behind and dropping out. The Sixth Form College is good for those who are not disciplined, but this college is good because it has helped me to realise that I could go to university.’ (Completers focus group 2)

Meanwhile another completer observed that:

‘This is a more relaxed, friendly place but there is a little thing inside me which says I might have done a little bit

better in a school sixth form because I might have been pushed harder.’ (Completers focus group 6)

This could be an even greater problem for leavers, as a member of the A Level team noted in one of the staff focus groups: ‘we are taking a lot of students who are not at all committed and then saying: organise yourselves.’ Similarly, an interview with the Student Liaison Officer, who was appointed in September 2000 to improve communication between staff and students, revealed that students had told her that they want some discipline because in their minds ‘discipline equals caring.’ She suggested that:

‘Our students have come from a very disciplined environment to almost no discipline. There needs to be a progression from their school experience—not total change.’

In terms of Hargreaves’ (1997) model of school cultures, the students have moved from a type ‘A’ culture in school, where there is an emphasis on formal structures and social control, to a type ‘B’ welfarist culture, which is characterised by informal, friendly student-teacher relationships. In the latter :

‘the students are happy at the time but in later life look back on their experience with resentment at the teachers’ failure to drive them hard enough. In the formal school, by contrast, students are often unhappy at the time, but later recall their experience with gratitude.’ (Hargreaves 1997, p.240)

Therefore, the challenge for the case-study college, as one of the tutors suggested in a staff focus group is ‘to get the balance right between pushing and supporting’.

Intimidation and the disciplinary procedure

Initially, the analysis of the 2% of withdrawals resulting from students ‘being asked to leave by the college’ (Table 4.2) did not appear to be directly relevant to the learning experience inside the classroom because the incidents related to intimidating behaviour by groups of students who were situated away from the teaching areas of the college. However, an interview with the Student Liaison Officer revealed that some students had indicated to her that they had considered leaving because they felt threatened by the

abusive actions of groups of young students who congregated near to the college refectory. She speculated that when some students cited 'personal reasons' as their explanation for withdrawal they may have been reluctant or too embarrassed to cite bullying and intimidation outside the classroom as the real cause.

Although no evidence to corroborate this view was found in the explanations offered to tutors by the leavers, several biographical interviewees who were members of the Access to HE programme did identify examples of more subtle forms of anti-social behaviour which were inside the classroom and could contribute to withdrawal. Indeed, in both cases the informants indicated that, such was the subtlety of the behaviour, they had deliberately chosen to use the biographical interviews as a means of reporting the incidents because they felt that their tutors would have been unaware of the problem.

Anne described the destructive tensions which had developed between two cliques of students who shared a module in Psychology. As one of a small number of 'neutral' students on the general Access pathway Anne found herself situated between two hostile groups in the classroom. The first group, which was drawn from the Access to Social Work strand consisted largely of single parents who had significant domestic responsibilities, very limited financial resources and had arrived with few previous qualifications, tended to resent the Access to Teaching pathway, who tended to be younger, had no domestic responsibilities, had the means to socialise with each other outside the lesson and had already achieved some traditional qualifications. Anne's conversations with other 'neutral' students, who had themselves only recently built up sufficient confidence to return to education, revealed that they had felt so intimidated by these tensions that they had considered leaving during the first few weeks of the course. She believed that if they had chosen to leave it would have been at a stage before the potentially destructive tensions became apparent to tutors. In such a situation the cause of leaving might have been recorded as 'personal reasons' and therefore could have been regarded as being beyond the control of the college. In this particular case the 'neutral' students stayed on the programme because they had 'bonded together in adversity', but the episode illustrates both the need

for strategies to diffuse such tensions and the difficulty of diagnosing accurately the causes of withdrawal.

Meanwhile, Sandra's case provides an example of an individual whose circumstances made her particularly vulnerable to subtle forms of intimidating behaviour by another student. She was a single parent whose husband had left her and she saw the Access course as a means of escaping from a series of low paid jobs with no prospects. Before her husband had left, Sandra had attempted to join an HND course but he had refused to support her because 'he did not want me to get ahead of him.' She had been categorised as being 'at risk' because her husband was not providing any financial support for their three children and, even from the start of the course, Sandra was frequently absent because she had to take her eldest son to hospital for regular tests.

Sandra had considered dropping out of the Access programme after her credibility with her tutor had been undermined temporarily by another member of the course group who claimed that Sandra had fabricated the reason for her frequent absences and was malingering. The malicious nature of these accusations was revealed to her only towards the end of the course when two other students approached her and advised her to inform both her tutor and her biographical interviewer that she had been the victim of an unusual form of bullying by another adult. Sandra attributed her decision to complete the programme primarily to the sense of achievement she gained from the course, but she also acknowledged the importance of the college's financial support for her childcare, the remedial action taken by her tutor in dispensing with the minimum attendance requirement of 80% after discovering the bullying and the encouragement of an older female friend who had no connection with the college. In doing so, her case illustrates the need to develop a range of strategies to support the intricate inter-dependence of college-based and external influences on retention.

Overall, the analysis in response to research question 2 has produced evidence of anti-social behaviour, the impact of organisational ambiguity on the IGC and student support systems, paradoxically conflicting expectations of the college culture, and unco-ordinated assignment schedules, which

point a range of issues that need to be addressed in the managerial response in Chapter 6. The investigation will now turn to the second key question to be examined in this chapter, that of the other side of the complex inter-relationship between college-based and external influences on retention and withdrawal.

Influences from outside the college

This section will analyse the data collected in response to research question 3:

To what extent do environmental factors, such as socio-economic background, immediate job opportunities or feeder schools, contribute to drop-out?

The relevance of this question becomes apparent when the reasons for leaving in Table 4.2 are examined. The main reason for leaving in over 80% of the withdrawals from the survey population appeared to be related to influences from outside the college. Moreover, merely three 'external' reasons, finding employment, family/personal problems and illness, accounted for two thirds of the total withdrawals. The review of the literature suggests that to explain the occurrence of these reasons, it is necessary to examine a range of factors, including the demographic, socio-economic and health profile of the habitus, the impact of part-time employment, the attitude of feeder schools towards the college and, finally, the disposition of the students. To explore each of these factors the characteristics of leavers and completers were compared by drawing on data from the induction survey. From the outcome of this exercise, and with the aim of improving the validity of the findings, an attempt was made to triangulate the results with the evidence gathered by the focus groups and biographical interviews. The insights gained from this analysis, together with the findings from research question 2, then informed the development of the retention improvement strategy sought by research question 4.

Demographic factors

Table 4.5: Gender, age and ethnicity of the survey population

	Completers %	Leavers %
Gender		
Male	30	38
Female	70	62
Age		
16-19	80	81
20-25	6	9
26-30	7	5
31+	7	5
Ethnicity		
Black	3	2
Chinese	0.5	-
White	96.5	98

Table 4.5 indicates that males were marginally more likely to leave than females, a trend which is consistent with the sample of 9000 students drawn from the 31 colleges in a study collated by Martinez and Munday (1998). Meanwhile the predominance of females in the overall survey population reflected the gender balance of the college as a whole, in contrast to the age structure, where four-fifths of the 374 students in the case study were in the 16-19 age group. As Chapter 3 has shown, the research design had planned to include Access to HE students in all three years of the study but was prevented from doing so during the first two years by opposition from tutors in the Science Section. Thus, there were insufficient students in the higher age categories to discern any trend. A similar difficulty was apparent in the analysis of the effect of ethnicity, where, although the proportion of students from ethnic minority backgrounds exceeded that of the local population, which at the time of the 2001 Census was 98.8% white (ONS 2003), the proportions in the non-white categories were too small to be able to identify a meaningful difference between leavers and completers. Therefore, apart from a small difference by gender, the survey data relating to demographic

factors did not reveal any evidence which could contribute to an improved understanding of patterns of withdrawal.

Social class, cultural and social capital

By collecting data about the social class and educational background of the students’ parents, the level of interest shown in their children’s schooling and their economic circumstances, comparisons could be made between leavers and completers about the level of support, or cultural and social capital (Reay 1998, 2001; Reay et al. 2001a; Reay et al 2002) available in the home. As Bynner and Joshi (2002) and Makepeace et al (2003) have observed recently, studies in educational sociology during the last 50 years, including the three British national birth cohort studies of 1946, 1958 and 1970, have consistently shown that the relationship between socio-economic position and levels of educational attainment continues to exist in Britain: ‘despite the expansion of educational opportunities across the board, the gap in the chances of gaining tertiary qualifications for the offspring of fathers in the highest and lowest social classes has widened steadily over time.’ (Makepeace et al., 2003, p.45)

However, Table 4.6 suggests that in the survey population of the college case study the socio-economic position of leavers and completers is very similar. Although more leavers than completers lived in a household where the head was unemployed, the most notable feature of the table is that both

Table 4.6: Social class of Head of Household*

	Middle classes			Self-employed	Working classes			Unemployed
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Completers %	0	12	11	8	13	22	10	24
Leavers %	1	9	13	9	16	12	7	33

*The social class categories used in this investigation are based on the new classification devised by Rose and O’Reilly (1998) for the 2001 Census. The Head of Household has been used as the unit of measurement, rather than the male earner, to avoid sexism and in recognition of the fact that in many households a female is the main breadwinner.

groups are drawn predominantly from less privileged social groups, with 69% of completers and 68% of leavers being either working class or unemployed (classes 5 to 8). Similarly, the most remarkable feature of parents' age on leaving school and qualifications (Table 4.7) is that over one third of both groups did not know when their parents left school and over a half did not know whether they had gained any qualifications, suggesting that the influence of education on parental occupational histories was rarely discussed in the majority of households. As only a minority of parents appeared to have achieved qualifications beyond GCSE or its equivalent, there appeared to be an absence of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1977) in the majority of households. This trend was also reflected in Table 4.8 where fewer than half of all households had more than five books which

Table 4.7: Parents' age on leaving school and highest qualification obtained by parents

Age	Father		Mother	
	Completers %	Leavers %	Completers %	Leavers %
15-16	52	49	47	55
17-18	4	7	8	7
19+	7	6	8	5
Don't know	37	39	37	33
Highest qualification achieved	By father		By mother	
	Completers %	Leavers %	Completers %	Leavers %
None	10	16	12	23
O levels/GCSE/Level 2	14	15	18	22
A levels/Level 3	7	4	5	5
Degree/professional qualification	8	8	10	6
Don't know	61	57	55	44

could help with school studies. However, the households of completers had more siblings/partners who had been in full-time education beyond the age of 18 (Table 4.9), while leavers were also less likely to receive more active forms of support such as attending parents evenings (Table 4.10), asking about progress at school (Table 4.11) and offering to help with homework (Table 4.12). Nevertheless, approximately four-fifths of both leavers and completers received family support for their decision to come to college (Table 4.13), although the completers enjoyed a 12% advantage in the category ‘very strong support’.

Table 4.8: Number of books in household which could assist school work

Number of books	Completers %	Leavers %
0-5	52	53
6-10	33	28
11-20	9	9
21+	6	10

Table 4.9: Number of members of immediate family, other than parents, who have been in full-time education beyond the age of 18

Number of family members	Completers %	Leavers %
0	39	53
1	38	32
2	18	9
3 or more	5	6

Table 4.10: Frequency of attendance at parents’ evenings

	Completers %	Leavers %
Most	71	62
Some	21	19
Very few	4	12
None	4	7

Table 4.11: Frequency of parental enquiries about progress at school

	Completers %	Leavers %
Most days	64	54
At least once per week	20	18
At least once per month	4	11
Rarely	11	13
Never	1	4

Table 4.12: Frequency of parents offering to help with homework

	Completers %	Leavers %
Most days	34	29
At least once per week	27	20
At least once per month	7	4
Rarely	19	23.5
Never	13	23.5

Table 4.13: Level of family support for student's decision to join the college

	Completers %	Leavers %
Very strong support	74	62
Some support	14	18
Neutral	8	14
Not interested	2	5
Opposed	2	1

The influence of parental support on the decision to complete a course was noted in the focus groups:

‘I considered leaving because I was bored but my mum and dad stopped me.’ (Completers focus group 1)

‘My mother wasn’t impressed when I left this college last year. She encouraged me to come back and start again.’

(Completers focus group 3)

In some cases this support may have owed something to the experience of higher education gained by another family member:

‘I got a lot of support at home—it was definitely important in encouraging me to stay. My mum has been to college and she bought me all the books I need.’ (Completers focus group 2)

‘My mum and dad didn’t push me but, because my brother and sister had both been to university, I think they expected me to go.’ (Completers focus group 4)

Nevertheless, such support did not always depend on the possession of ‘cultural capital’:

‘My parents laughed when I said I was going to college because no-one in our family has gone into further education. They assumed that I wasn’t clever enough and would just get a job, but they did support me to carry on when I wasn’t sure whether to stay.’ (Completers focus group 4)

However, the absence of unambiguous support from parents about the benefits of participating in post-compulsory education can contribute to a series of confused decisions which ultimately result in withdrawal, as one of the biographical interviewees found. Matt’s educational record since leaving school had begun on an Intermediate GNVQ in Engineering, which he had started only because his father had discouraged him from pursuing his interest in Drama on the grounds that it would not lead to a career. He failed to achieve the qualification but completed the course because he had received a weekly attendance payment. Then, after a brief appearance on an Advanced GNVQ Business course, which his father also thought might be useful, he had switched to AS Levels several weeks after the course had started because he did not like the content of the GNVQ programme.

During his second term on the AS Level course, Matt dropped English Language as he found it too theoretical, although he had no complaints about the quality of teaching he had received. Despite achieving pass grades in AS Level Business Studies, General Studies and Media Studies, Matt continued only with the latter at the start of his A2 year, but still insisted that he was 'vaguely interested' in the idea of progressing to HE and believed that it was possible to do so with one A Level. He also admitted that he had been fortunate to pass his favourite subject, AS Level Media Studies, because he had been drinking heavily with his friends on the night before the examination and had overslept. After his tutor had contacted his mother when he had missed the start of the examination, Matt arrived late and took the examination while suffering with a severe hangover and suggested that he had passed only because his tutor had managed to predict the main questions on the paper.

Throughout this period his mother had wanted him to find a full-time job 'because it was about time he paid something towards his keep' To appease her he had taken a part-time job in the evenings and paid his mother £20 per week. Here, Matt's response to the financial pressure exerted by his mother is interesting, because, as Callender (2003) has noted recently, the research literature tends to stress the role of fathers in influencing their children's decision to enter higher education. Yet, in her study of the extent to which a fear of debt is currently discouraging school and FE college students from progressing to HE in the UK, it was found that respondents whose mothers had attended university were far less likely to reject university than those whose mother had not experienced university. In terms of its relevance to Matt's eventual withdrawal, this finding is important because it is consistent with the work of Coleman (1997) who noted the importance of a mother's expectation of a child's progression to HE in his study of students who dropped out of high school in the USA during the 1980s.

By contrast, Matt's father had vacillated between suggesting that he look for a job and recommending that he should stay in education but change direction yet again to take 'something with IT in it because his mate worked in that area and had told him that there were good jobs if you had a qualification in that subject.' Therefore, his father had approved of his

decision to continue the link with Business Studies by taking an AS Level in it, but had criticised his decision to study Media Studies because it 'wouldn't lead to a job.' Consequently he was shocked when Matt dropped Business Studies after achieving an AS level pass in the subject, having only heard about this decision as a result of a casual question about his college commitments on Matt's return from two weeks holiday, which had also clashed with the first two weeks of the new term at the start of his second year.

Significantly, neither of Matt's parents had studied beyond the minimum school leaving age. Their conflicting advice, and his father's limited knowledge of both career and educational opportunities, left Matt to face the following dilemma:

'My mum wants to put me in any job just to bring money home, whereas my dad wants me to have a career. I think they are both right in their own way—I do need money whatever I do, but I agree with my dad more because of the career aspect. I don't want to end up like my dad in the factory.'

These pressures compounded his own uncertainty and confusion which were illustrated by his observation that 'I haven't got a clue what I want to do which is why I keep changing subjects.' Although the immediate cause of his final withdrawal from his only remaining subject, A Level Media Studies, was the need to obtain a full-time job to fund his move from the family home to share a rented flat with his first serious girlfriend, and he had already demonstrated a lack of commitment by his late appearance for both the AS Level examination and the start of the following term when he had been on holiday, his progress towards non-completion may have been linked, at least in part, to attitudes and expectations existing in what Reay (1998), drawing on Bourdieu (1977), has termed the 'familial habitus'.

While Matt's mother and father appeared to hold conflicting views about whether to support his college course, some other parents disengaged from the process completely or were openly hostile. One of the tutors reported that:

‘Every year I have faced a situation where, when I have rung a parent to ask why their son or daughter was absent, I’ve been told “It’s not my responsibility to go chasing X about the course. X is an adult now and it’s her/his choice whether s/he goes to college. S/he is out at the moment but please don’t ring me again. Let X make up her/his own mind.” When you get this sort of response it extremely difficult to make progress or to operate an attendance monitoring procedure consistently.’ (Tutors focus group)

On other occasions parents have refused to support the cost of maintaining a student while on the course:

‘I’ve known loads of cases where parents won’t support students and so they have to get a job and end up dropping out. They’ve got to pay keep, pay transport and for books and they can’t cope without a full-time job.’ (Completers focus group 1)

Among the mature students, opposition from partners was also evident, together with examples of the barriers to learning which can be created by other family members. Diane, who was one of the biographical interviewees from the Access programme, revealed a series of difficulties in her personal life which challenged her resolve. After Diane’s husband left her, she moved with her two children into her mother’s house and applied to be placed on the already lengthy council house waiting list. She found it difficult to study because her mother thought that Diane should concentrate on looking after her children rather than working on the course and the three-bedroomed house became very overcrowded when her divorced brother and his three children stayed at weekends. An attempted reconciliation with her husband was unsuccessful and was followed by a very acrimonious divorce. After facing further problems, including the theft and destruction of her car by vandals and her former husband’s decision to initiate divorce proceedings only two weeks before her examinations, her progress to a degree course was delayed by a year, when her sister-in-law’s failure to honour a promise to look after Diane’s children prevented her from attending her first Access examination.

However, as an account from one of the other mature biographical interviewees demonstrates, the support of friends in encouraging students to continue can compensate for the opposition of family members. Helen indicated that her determination to succeed on the Access programme was influenced by an episode some years earlier when her ex-husband had insisted that she should abandon a Beauty Therapy course after five months as he did not want her to progress in an independent career. Alongside the financial support she had received from the college together with her tutor's flexibility in extending assignment deadlines and providing individual tuition to cover the work she had missed, Helen identified the continuing encouragement of two middle class female friends in helping her to complete the course despite her financial difficulties and her frequent absences caused by her son's complicated medical history. Her friends' successful careers had served as a goal to which she aspired, not only to escape from an unfulfilling job but also as a way of 'setting a standard for the children—something they could be proud of.'

Helen's case is interesting because, in common with Sandra, whose account of victimisation by other Access students was described earlier, it illuminates the complex interaction which can occur between external and college-based influences on retention and withdrawal. The combined support of friends and college staff appears to have been crucial in helping Helen to overcome the barriers imposed by her domestic circumstances in order to complete her programme. Without the encouragement of friends, both Helen and Sandra might not have stayed long enough to benefit from the financial, pastoral and academic support provided by the college. Yet without the support from college, the encouragement of friends might have been insufficient on its own to result in completion. Thus, the external and college-based sources of support were inter-dependent.

Meanwhile, the role of friendship both within and outside the college as a source of social capital in promoting retention was clearly illustrated by one of the younger students. Rachel, who had enrolled on the two year GCSE after having attended school for only six weeks during the previous two years, missed a high proportion of classes in her first term at college and gave the impression that she was about to withdraw because she lacked

commitment. However, the biographical interviews revealed that she had demonstrated a high level of commitment to practical and very constructive activities which interested her outside college. The catalyst for this work had been friendship. Her friendship with a number of youth workers, which had begun while she was at school, had encouraged her to show considerable initiative in helping them to establish a club for 11 to 13 year olds. She had been given responsibility for booking the accommodation, designing the publicity leaflets and devising activities that would interest young people. Having completed 200 hours of voluntary work, Rachel had gained a Millennium Volunteer's Certificate and the youth workers who had inspired this success also encouraged her to stay at college: 'they've supported me and they're always there for me if I need them.' By contrast, she felt that the influence of her family was diminishing: 'I don't really talk to them much and I've grown apart from my mum.' This was also reflected in her future plans, where her career was more important than family and marriage:

'I'm not bothered if I end up on my own. I just want to be happy with what I've done in life—at what I've achieved.'

With this in mind, and to further her career aim of entering the police force, she volunteered to work at the 2002 Commonwealth Games as a travel operation assistant.

During her second term at college after Rachel had developed a mutually supportive friendship with another of the biographical interviewees, Jenny, her attendance and enthusiasm for her course improved significantly and having completed the programme, she went on to enrol for a another college course with Jenny. In common with the experience of both Helen and Sandra, Rachel's biographical account illustrates the inter-dependence of college-based and external forms of support, but it also indicates that the provision of such support systems should not be left to chance if significant improvements in retention are to be achieved in a setting where almost one quarter of the survey population left for 'family/personal reasons'. Therefore, strategies for the development of a systematic method of promoting the development of mutually supportive friendships within the college will be discussed in Chapter 6 under research question 4.

Economic capital

To explore whether economic rather than cultural and social factors could influence differences in the level of support offered by parents, the induction survey gathered data relating to a number of measures of affluence. When levels of affluence were compared, some variations between completers and leavers emerged. No difference was found in car ownership (Table 4.14), but, computer ownership, a more contemporary measure of relative affluence which can support homework assignments, revealed a 11% difference between completers and leavers.

Table 4.14: Measures of Affluence

	Completers %	Leavers %
Car ownership		
No car	20	24
One car	47	37
Two or more cars	33	39
Housing tenure		
Own/buying home	57	44
Renting	43	56
Use of computer at home		
No computer	33	44
Have access to a computer	67	56

While this difference does not appear to have affected levels of confidence in using a computer, where no difference was found (Table 4.15), a trend which probably reflects the inclusion of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the school curriculum since the late 1980s, the absence of a computer at home was reported to be a disadvantage by members of all of the completers focus groups, who indicated that few students worked on assignments in the college learning centres because they preferred to study at home. Meanwhile, a 13% difference in the completers' favour was identified in housing tenure, where home ownership may suggest a more secure economic position than renting a property (Table 4.14). Thus, there was some evidence that completers enjoyed a more materially advantageous

position than the leavers, but no pattern could be identified between the 6% of students who left for financial reasons and the other measures in Table 4.14. Moreover, as Callender (1999) has shown in research sponsored by the FEFC into the link between hardship and continued participation in FE, the full impact of financial difficulties on retention rates is difficult to measure and, as a result, is often underestimated because it can affect students who are apparently retained. A significant proportion of the students in her study indicated that, although they had completed their current course, they had rejected the idea of progression to the next level due to their financial difficulties. Indeed, over one third of the students had found that the need to take on part-time work had affected their academic performance.

Table 4.15: Level of confidence in the use of the computer

Level of confidence	Completers %	Leavers %
Very confident	31	35
Fairly confident	55	47
Not confident	13	14
Terrified	1	4

Part-time work

As the category of leaving for 'financial reasons' had been used in this investigation to distinguish cases where students had indicated that their reason for leaving to seek a job resulted from financial difficulties, rather than entering full-time employment in preference to continuing with the course, an attempt was made to explore the extent to which either type of withdrawal was preceded by engagement in part-time work. An initial analysis of all students in Table 4.16 suggested that the number who worked part-time was modest and that the proportion of completers with jobs exceeded that of leavers by 9%.

However, it became apparent that the induction survey may not have revealed the true extent of students part-time employment commitments, when the focus groups with tutors and students who completed indicated

Table 4.16: Students with part-time jobs during the course

	Completers %	Leavers %
Working part-time	37	28
No paid work	63	72
Mean number of hours per week	14.6	14.4

that the proportion was far higher, and also many students had increased their hours of paid work after they have finalised their course timetables during the early weeks of the programme. This observation appears to be consistent with the fact that only 50% of students who left to undertake a full-time job had provided details of their part-time work in the induction survey, although students can move into full-time employment without having had a previous part-time job. Furthermore, evidence from a number of recent studies suggests that the proportion of students in the survey population who had paid employment, shown in Table 4.16, was considerably below the figure found in other colleges. In a review of three studies of college students who worked part-time, Hodgson and Spours (2001) found that between 70% and 80% of 16-19 year olds in full-time education were involved in paid employment. Similarly, in an analysis of data drawn from the Youth Cohort Study, Payne (2001) found that only 14% of Year 13 students had not at some point had a job since the end of Year 11.

In the case-study college, the students' reluctance to provide details of their part-time jobs could have been influenced also by the programme leader's policy, during initial guidance and counselling, of discouraging course applicants from undertaking an excessive number of hours of paid work. In Table 4.16, the difference between the mean number of hours worked by completers and leavers was very small, but for both groups it exceeded the 10 hours per week identified by Barwuah et al (1997) as being the stage beyond which part-time employment becomes a distraction rather than a beneficial preparation for adult life, a concern shared by principals of sixth-form colleges (TES 24 January 2003). However, as the data may have been

incomplete, no firm conclusions can be drawn in this study about the influence which part-time work has on the largest single cause of leaving, 'starting a job' or those who left for financial reasons.

Illness

Meanwhile, another factor which figured prominently in the reasons for leaving was illness. As the third most frequently cited reason for leaving, the prevalence of this factor is consistent with the unusually high proportion of the local population who suffer from serious health problems. The borough in which the college is situated has the highest infant mortality rate and the highest standardised mortality rate for all cancers in England and Wales and the second highest for all causes (source withheld to preserve anonymity). Furthermore, data from the 2001 Census (ONS 2003) indicate that the borough was ranked 23rd out of the 375 districts in England and Wales for the proportion of permanently sick and disabled in the area and 15th for the number of households where unpaid care was provided for 50 or more hours per week. This placed the borough in the top 7% in England and Wales for the former measure and in the top 4% for the latter indicator.

When an attempt was made to analyse the effect of these local conditions on the learning experience of the survey population, the results were less marked than would have been anticipated. 48% of completers and 49% of leavers indicated that they spent at least two hours per day looking after someone in the household, but only 12% of the former and 8% of the latter felt that it reduced the time that they wished to spend in college. However, these results may have been affected by several methodological weaknesses in the research design. The data about the impact of caring responsibilities on college attendance (question 28ii in the induction questionnaire) did not ask whether study patterns at home were affected, and the administration of the survey during induction week may have elicited an optimistic anticipatory response from students because they had not experienced the pressures imposed by their courses when they answered the question. Thus, these results do not identify the circumstances which resulted in 13% of the leavers citing 'illness' as their main reason for withdrawal.

By contrast, the impact of personal and family illness, especially when combined with financial difficulties, was vividly illustrated in the case of one of the biographical interviewees. Amanda was judged to be 'at risk' because she had withdrawn from the same course during the previous year and her explanation for that earlier withdrawal, which is shown as the second example of 'Form 3' of Appendix 2, had been used to train tutors in the use of the 'at risk' procedure. Her biography revealed that her life had been shaped by a number of medical and financial difficulties. Placed in foster care at the age of 13, she became pregnant by the time she was 16 and was married shortly afterwards. After she had given birth to her second child she was placed under the supervision of a Community Psychiatric Nurse (CPN) because she was diagnosed as having depression with bipolar tendencies and had threatened to harm her children. Shortly before she had withdrawn from her course on the previous occasion she had begun to look after her younger brother while her father spent an extended period in hospital due to renal failure. Then, on rejoining her course, she faced financial difficulties resulting from her separation from her husband. To overcome this problem she financed herself by organising parties to sell a brand of female underwear and had persuaded a male friend to pretend that he was living with her so that she could claim family credit.

Following lengthy absences during the first year, her tutors prepared her for the AS Level examinations by providing individual revision lessons which helped her to achieve grades A, B and C. This success encouraged her to apply for entry to a Classics degree, but shortly afterwards she left her A Level course suddenly, following a dispute with her neighbour which involved painting his lawn white in retaliation for an earlier violent disagreement. After being arrested by the police and examined by a doctor she was released on the condition that she was required to take antidepressants under the supervision of her CPN. Immediately after this episode, when she attended her penultimate biographical interview, she insisted that she was 'absolutely certain' that she would finish her course, but then left on the following day. During her final interview six months later she explained that she had 'fallen into a depression after being on a high and couldn't even go out of the house.' When she had recovered she

obtained a job and hoped to take her degree on a day-release basis because she needed an income to support her children.

Moreover, Amanda's situation was not an isolated case, as the account of another of the biographical interviewees indicates. Laura withdrew half way through the second year of her AS/A Level, after having been identified as being 'at risk' due to the complications arising from the medical history of one of her children. Having passed two AS Levels in her first year, she began to miss an increasing number of lessons at the start of her second year. These absences were attributed to the difficulties she was encountering with the disturbed behaviour of her youngest daughter, who suffered from a psychological disability caused by a missing chromosome. Her condition meant that Laura's attempts to study were continually disrupted by a child who rarely slept for more than a few hours and had been diagnosed as having self-harming potential. As the child's behaviour became more challenging, Laura had been required to miss college sessions in order to take her for a wide range of medical investigations. In her final interview Laura indicated that she had dropped out because she could no longer maintain the minimum level of attendance required by the college to qualify for financial support to meet the costs of child care. Although, as will be shown later, her attendance problems and ultimate withdrawal may have owed more to significant changes in her personal life, which she chose not to disclose during the biographical interviews, the difficulties she faced resulting from her daughter's condition were not only genuine but were also of a sufficiently serious nature to qualify for substantial financial support from the college's Student Services Department.

Feeder schools

Having considered conditions in the students' habitus, which can influence specific reasons for leaving, such illness, financial difficulties and personal/family problems, the analysis now moves to a factor that can shape a student's attitude to the college before they arrive. As the literature review in Chapter 2 has shown, Page (1996) found that the feeder school attended by a student was a key variable in explaining withdrawal at the college in her study. A direct comparison between the case-study college and the FE establishment on which Page (1996) based her study proved to be

problematic: the latter drew students from only 14 feeder schools in two neighbouring towns whereas the 374 students in the current study came from 58 schools situated not only in the local area but also from towns in the surrounding conurbation.

Nevertheless, an attempt was made to explore the impact of this factor by limiting the analysis to 16-19 year old students from schools which each provided a minimum of 20 pupils. The rationale for the age limit was that the influence of the feeder establishment on the formation of attitudes to the college was likely to be less relevant to mature students. The age limit, together with the application of the minimum number criterion reduced the number of feeder schools from 58 to a more manageable total of 10 establishments. The three schools which provided the students whose drop-out rate exceeded 50% were then compared with the other 7 feeder establishments. Table 4.17 reveals that when comparisons were made between the impression gained about the college in the former with that of the latter, more than half of students in all categories had gained a positive impression and only a small minority arrived at the college with a negative image of its provision. A similar pattern emerged when the teachers' attitude to the students' decision to join the college was examined in Table 4.18. Although leavers were marginally less likely than completers to join the college with the support of their teachers, even two-thirds of leavers from the schools associated with the highest drop-out rates had apparently approved of their decision. Thus, on this evidence, the general impression of the college gained by students while at school appears to have been remarkably positive in all categories.

Table 4.17: Impression gained about the college by 16-19 year old students while attending feeder schools

	Completers		Leavers	
	3 schools with the highest drop-out rates	Other schools	3 schools with the highest drop-out rates	Other schools
Positive impression	57	56	56	60
Negative impression	16	8	12	7
No impression	27	36	32	33

Table 4.18: Teachers’ attitudes towards the decision to join the college (16-19 year old students only).

	Completers		Leavers	
	3 schools with the highest drop-out rates	Other schools	3 schools with the highest drop-out rates	Other schools
Positive	82	84	67	75
Opposed the decision	18	16	33	25

However, the evidence from the induction survey contradicts the qualitative data from the staff and student focus groups in this study, which showed unambiguously that teachers in the majority of the case-study college’s local schools attempted to deter students from applying for places on academic programmes such as A Level. College tutors with more than 10 years’ experience of interviewing applicants indicated that they had frequently been told by prospective students that they had been advised against seeking a place at the college, a trend confirmed by the student focus groups:

‘The teachers saw it as the Technical College where you went if you weren’t good enough to do A Levels. It wasn’t even regarded as an option for A Levels.’ (Completers focus group 2)

‘I was told by my teachers that the FE college was OK for vocational courses but not for A Levels.’ (Completers focus group 3)

‘You don’t want to go to XXXX College because they don’t do A Levels, and anyway they won’t help you with your studies there.’ (Completers focus group 4)

‘The careers teacher said “the FE college is the last resort” and told me to go to the Sixth Form College.’ (Completers focus group 6)

Similarly, members of the student focus groups indicated that they had been released from their secondary schools to attend open days at the Sixth Form

College but had not been permitted to attend equivalent events at the case-study college and had consequently made individual visits to the evening element of Open Day sessions at the FE college:

‘We had so much information about the Sixth Form College and we had to go there for two days when we were in Year 11 to attend taster sessions, but we had no information about this college.’ (Completers focus group 4)

‘We were not allowed to come to XXXX College. The school didn’t even tell us about your Open Days. We only found out about your courses because some of us had friends or relatives who were already here and the Open Day adverts in the local newspapers mentioned college’s high pass rates so we came along to see what it was like.’ (Completers focus group 1)

One factor which may have influenced staff in the feeder schools to make the negative remarks reported by the focus groups, and casts further doubt about the accuracy of the results shown in Tables 4.17 and 4.18, is the existence of ‘compact’ arrangements between the majority of secondary schools and the local Sixth Form College. Such arrangements enable the 11-16 schools to use their ‘feeder’ status with the oversubscribed Sixth Form College as a marketing device to attract pupils from local primary schools, and therefore they have an incentive to promote the courses offered by their tertiary partner in order to maintain the ‘compact’. The effects of this relationship were clearly evident in the account provided by a member of the staff focus group who described the outcome of a rare opportunity he had gained to speak to a Year 11 class in one of the local secondary schools:

‘After I had just made a presentation about our very high pass rates at A Level the careers teacher thanked me in front of the group and then said to them “Well as you can see, if you want to do vocational courses you go to the Technical College, but if you want to do A Levels it’s the Sixth Form College.”

This also echoes the subtle elitism that was a key feature of the culture of Stokingham, the sixth form college studied by Hodgkinson and Bloomer (2000a). They found that ‘this culture inadvertently defined the FE college and its students as second best’ (p.199), and, significantly, none of their sample of students who attended the Stokingham had treated the local FE college as a serious option. Moreover, the high status attached to attending the sixth form college meant that many were already positively oriented to its culture before they arrived.

Meanwhile, in contrast to the data shown in Tables 4.17 and 4.18, other evidence drawn from the induction survey does support the statements made by the focus groups at the case-study college. Table 4.19, which describes the students’ main source of information about their college course before they enrolled, reveals that very few students gained such information from school or careers teachers.

Table 4.19: Students ‘main source of information about their college course

Source of information	Completers %	Leavers %
Friends or family	31	21
School teacher	3	5
Careers teacher	4	3
Careers officer	6	10
Careers evening	1	1
Newspaper advert	5	5
College literature	11	15
College Open Day	18	17
Other personal visit to college	15	15
Staff on another course at the college	4	4
Other	2	4

Therefore, this suggests that the induction survey questions which gathered the data for Tables 4.17 and 4.18 were methodologically flawed because they may have encouraged students to respond uncritically in the belief that a positive response was expected by the college they had joined on the same

day as they had completed the questionnaire. If this is the case, then the extent to which there is a danger of a self-fulfilling prophecy of student withdrawal resulting from negative labelling of the college’s academic provision by staff in local secondary schools is a factor which requires further research. The evidence from the focus groups suggests that if this factor does influence early leaving, its source is likely to be located in a wider range of schools in the catchment area of the case-study college than was found in Page’s (1996) study, where it appeared to be concentrated in the most academically successful feeder school.

Prior attainment

The review of the literature identified another factor that can affect retention rates and is determined before students reach the college. Since the Audit Commission (1993) identified a high correlation between pre-course qualifications and early leaving rates on A Level programmes, there has been a need to consider the extent to which prior attainment influences withdrawal rates. More recent research by Fielding et al. (1998) has provided further evidence to support this correlation. However, when students’ mean points per subject are analysed for each programme in the survey population (Table 4.20), the differences between completers and

Table 4.20: Prior attainment and withdrawal rates: a comparison of GCSE points scores on entry to each programme

Programme	Completers		Leavers	
	Mean points per student	Mean points per subject	Mean points per student	Mean points per subject
A level	42.9	5.1	40.9	5.0
GCSE	28.6	3.5	23.7	3.3
Access (2001-02 only)	25.7	4.5	29.1	4.4

leavers are marginal in every case. While the mean of the total points per students is greater for completers than for leavers on the A Level and GCSE programmes (but the reverse for Access to HE), the differences appear to be insufficient to be regarded as a major contributory factor in the explanation of withdrawal from the case-study college.

The results shown in Table 4.20 may have been influenced by the college's recruitment policy, which had already taken account of the Audit Commission's (1993) findings by applying a minimum requirement of 4 GCSEs at grade C for entry to A Level. Similarly, students who arrived with fewer than 2 'D's or 3 'E's at GCSE were placed on the two-year rather than the one-year GCSE resit programme. By contrast, no formal entry requirement has been applied to the Access to HE course because the imposition of such a restriction would conflict with the name of the programme and negate the purpose of providing an alternative route for adults who wish to progress to a degree course without repeating school-based qualifications. This policy was also based on the belief that the experience gained by adults since leaving school may have a more significant influence on their subsequent educational success than grades achieved at the age of 16. Nevertheless, as an additional safeguard against the possible influence of low prior attainment, the 'at risk' procedure (Appendix 2) includes this factor in the criteria for identifying students who may need additional support. Thus, Access students who arrive with few qualifications, and A Level or GCSE students who enter with only the minimum requirements for their programmes, can be nominated on 'Form 1' of the procedure and monitored discretely if their tutors believe it is necessary.

An additional factor which may have reduced the impact of prior attainment on rates of withdrawal is illustrated by secondary source data provided by Durham University (2002). The data indicate that the college has achieved exceptional levels of value added during the period covered by this study. The effect, as Table 4.21 shows, has been to raise the achievement and retention levels of the high proportion of the college's students who appear in the 'D' band, or bottom quartile, of the national value added A Level Information System (ALIS) database, which is maintained by Durham University (2002).

Thus, the table indicates that the retention of the students with the lowest prior attainment (measured by GCSE scores on arrival at the college) and aptitude level (measured by the Test of Developed Ability or TDA)

Table 4.21: Improvement in retention rates within ALIS value added cohorts

	ALIS Prior attainment bands			
	D	C	B	A
September 1999 intake				
% in each band by GCSE scores	74	3	3	0
% retained	59	100	67	0
% in each band by TDA aptitude test	35	52	13	0
% retained	50	83	33	0
September 2000 intake				
% in each band by GCSE scores	78	12	8	2
% retained	66	83	75	0
% in each band by TDA aptitude test	49	37	10	4
% retained	65	67	60	100
September 2001 intake				
% in each band by GCSE scores	43	48	8	4
% retained	73	70	100	100
% in each band by TDA aptitude test	35	52	10	4
% retained	72	82	66	50

improved by the time the 2001 intake had completed their courses. As the studies by the Audit Commission (1993) and Fielding et al. (1998) have demonstrated that students with the lowest levels of prior attainment are potentially the most difficult to retain, the fact that almost three-quarters of the 'D' band completed their courses suggests that the college is becoming increasingly effective in addressing the threat to retention which is posed by this factor.

Disposition to learning

While only marginal differences were found in the prior attainment of completers and leavers, some important variations were identified in the commitment of students to their courses, which is the final factor to be considered under research question 3. This factor was examined in an attempt to explore the nature of the 'dispositions to learning' (Bloomer and Hodkinson 1997, 1999) held by the students when they arrived at the college.

Table 4.22 indicates that although there was a difference between completers and leavers of only 0.3 (on a scale of 10) in their commitment to

the course, more than one third of the former and over half of the latter had previously left a course during 2001-2002 without completing. While there was a difference of 16% between the two groups, a more revealing statistic emerged when the combined average for both leavers and completers was calculated: 43% of all students in the 2001-2002 cohort had previously left a course. In addition to illustrating the extent of 'interrupted learning' (McGivney 1996), this statistic suggests that in the case-study college a major challenge to improved retention lies in the level of student commitment to learning.

Table 4.22: Commitment to current course and history of previous withdrawal

	Completers	Leavers
Likelihood of course completion on a scale of 1-10 where 10 = highly likely (1999-2002)	9.0	8.7
% who have withdrawn from a previous course without completing (2001-2002 only)	37	53

To explore this factor, reference can be made to students' reasons for attending the college and the month in which students first applied to the college. Table 4.23 reveals that the reason which was cited most frequently by both completers and leavers and accounted for one third of all responses was 'near to home'. The fact that geographical convenience exceeded the combined total of 'good college reputation', 'good course reputation' and 'well qualified, experienced teachers' indicates the priorities of a significant proportion of the student body. (The modest rating accorded to academic qualities, together with a small percentage who enrolled on the recommendation of school teachers, is also relevant to the earlier discussion about the influence of feeder institutions, because it could be interpreted to indicate that many students had gained a negative impression of the college from staff in the schools, and provides another example of evidence which conflicts with the data in Tables 4.17 and 4.18.)

Table 4.23: Reasons for attending the College

Reason	Completers %	Leavers %
Good college reputation	23	20
Good course reputation	8	5
Well qualified, experienced teachers	1	1
Recommendation of family and friends	19	14
Near to home	33	34
Wanted to attend course with friends	4	2
Little chance of finding a job	1	9
Careers advice/guidance	5	8
Recommendation of school teachers	2	4
Other	4	3

Meanwhile, Table 4.24 indicates that the majority of students did not apply for a place on the course until the month before it was due to start, and over one third of leavers applied in September when the course was about to commence. This contrasts sharply with the alternative local supplier of the same courses, the local Sixth Form College, where recruitment interviews have normally been completed by March, and suggests that the decision to attend the case-study college was taken belatedly by many students and possibly with limited consideration of the commitment required. Such patterns of decision making appear to resemble those of the 'opportunists' in the study of Bournemouth and Poole College by Page (1998) and the 'choice avoiders' or 'unstable choosers' identified by Ball et al. (1998), who enrol because they have nothing else to do and leave when a better opportunity, such as employment, becomes available. Similarly, in Table 4.23 the difference which is evident between leavers and completers in the percentage who joined the college because they had little chance of finding a job, is consistent with the findings in the study of the Isle of Wight College by Medway and Penny (1994).

A further insight into the influence of variations in the student commitment on retention rates is offered by the value added data provided by Durham University (2002), which was discussed earlier in relation to prior

attainment. Table 4.25 indicates that almost half of the A Level Students in the ALIS cohorts appeared to have under-performed at school because they arrived at the college with GCSE scores which placed them in a prior attainment band which was below that of their TDA aptitude test results.

Table 4.24: Date of application to the College

Month applied	Completers %	Leavers %
November	2	2
December	1	0
January	1	2
February	4	1
March	2	2
April	4	3
May	8	3
June	11	10
July	6	8
August	35	29
September (course starts)	22	35
October (later starters)	4	5

Task 4.25: Comparison of average GCSE score bands (prior attainment) with TDA bands (aptitude scores) and withdrawal rates 1999-2002

Students with:	% of students in each category	% of total withdrawals
GCSE scores in bands above TDA bands	12	13
Equal GCSE and TDA band scores	42	32
GCSE scores below TDA scores	46	55

This could be explained by ineffective tuition at school, but as the students who displayed these characteristics were drawn from a range of schools in which other students' GCSE scores matched or even exceeded their TDA aptitude scores, it would appear that another factor was present. As the students who appear to have under-performed at school also had a higher drop-out rate at college than those whose scores matched, and they had withdrawn from a college which had proved in the ALIS data to be very effective in helping 'bottom band' students to achieve exceptional levels of value added, the evidence suggests their commitment to learning at both school and college may not have been as strong as the other students. (The 'bottom band' students who were retained tended to have GCSE and TDA scores which were equal.) Nevertheless, as the data relate to a sample drawn from only one college, and the withdrawal rate of the small proportion of students whose GCSE scores exceeded their TDA score was also higher than that of those whose scores were equal, further research into this issue is necessary before any firm conclusions can be drawn.

The implications of the findings

When the research questions were framed for this study, the college-based factors were considered separately from the influences from the external environment, because the policy assumptions discussed in Chapter 2 had defined the official understanding of the problem in this manner. However, the analysis of the findings has indicated that, in terms of the realities of the student experience, this separation of the factors into dichotomous groups was an artificial construction. As Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000a) have shown, a student's disposition to learning can be shaped by both experiences occurring in the habitus and in the classroom:

'Moreover, contexts do not have an independent existence of one another such as implied by dualistic distinctions commonly made between home, school, peer group, college or work contexts...' (p.590)

Their description of Amanda's story and the events leading to her withdrawal from one of the colleges in their study illustrates 'the complex interaction between experience in college, experience in life outside college

and contingency.’ (Hodkinson and Bloomer 2000b p. 3) Similarly, the biographical accounts of the Access students, Sandra and Helen, whose experiences were outlined earlier in the current case study, revealed that their decision to complete the programme was influenced by the combined support of friends outside and tutors inside the college. Thus, for both leavers and completers, there is often an intricate and delicately balanced inter-relationship between the college-based and external influences on the nature of their learning experience.

Therefore, when developing the retention improvement strategy required by research question 4 the challenge was to identify potential managerial solutions which addressed, in an integrated manner, both the college-based influences on withdrawal and the barriers to completion stemming from the conditions in the students’ habitus. In doing so, insights were drawn from the experiences of students whose completion of courses was assisted by a combination of support from sources within and beyond the college. This strategy is examined in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 5 REFLECTIONS ON THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Having analysed the data gathered in response to Research Questions 2 and 3 in the previous chapter, the research design which produced those findings will now be evaluated. This chapter examines the effectiveness of the methods employed in the study and it considers the ethical issues arising from their implementation. Within the discussion of each method, opportunities for improvements in the research design and the questions which require further exploration are identified. The chapter concludes by considering the impact of the change on the researcher's role which occurred during the course of the study.

The induction survey

The administration of the survey offered valuable insights into both educational management and research methodology. From a managerial perspective, the strategy of consulting the tutors about the content of the induction survey in order to foster a sense of ownership of the process appears to have contributed to the successful implementation of this element of the research design, as none of the students refused to complete the questionnaire. In view of the objections raised by the Science staff that the questionnaire was 'intrusive', the 100% response rate was both reassuring and informative. It was reassuring because it suggested that, despite being offered the opportunity in the preamble to the questionnaire (Appendix 1) to decline, the students did not find it intrusive and felt secure that the reassurances about confidentiality would be respected. Their response was informative because it appears to confirm the value of involving tutors in the design of the questionnaire and briefing new staff, who had joined the teaching team after the pilot stage, about its purpose and the security of the data before they were asked to administer the survey.

The value of briefing established members of the team regularly about the progress of the research also became apparent as the project progressed. In an organisation which faced the challenge of the exceptionally rapid

changes and conflicting priorities described in Chapter 1, it would have been unwise to assume that their continued enthusiasm for the project could be taken for granted over a three-year period, without being offered some evidence that their effort and commitment had contributed to an improved understanding of the problem of student withdrawal from their courses. Consequently, interim summaries of the survey results were presented to the tutors after data from each cohort had been processed.

The interim summaries appeared not only to encourage renewed interest in the project but, from a methodological perspective, also promoted useful discussions about the interpretation of the data, which came to resemble the effect of the 'hermeneutic circle' (Gadamer 1960), whereby the meaning of the overall results was enhanced by the tutors' detailed knowledge and understanding of the contextual parts. As with the hermeneutic circle, the interpretation was always provisional and subject to revision following the collection of further evidence, but the process of debate stimulated the identification of a range of possible interpretations which could be explored as the research developed.

Tables 4.5 to 4.14 have already demonstrated that the survey yielded sufficient data to examine the socio-economic issues which were raised by the literature review and summarised on pages 30-31 of Chapter 3. As the review of the literature revealed, some of these socio-economic indicators had not been explored previously in the context of student drop-out, and the survey provided an opportunity to consider the potential impact of factors such as social class position, levels of parental education, and variations in cultural, social and material capital in the home. However, the late inclusion, after the piloting stage, of the question which measured the extent of withdrawal from previous courses was unfortunate because it resulted in the provision of data for only the final cohort of the three-year survey population. Table 4.22 has shown that the very high proportions of both leavers and completers with a history of previous drop-out suggests that this is potentially one of the most important findings of this study and requires further exploration.

The question which provided data for this finding (question 20 in Appendix 1) was not sufficiently specific because, by failing to ask for the date and location of the previous withdrawal, it prevented the analysis of patterns of drop-out. In particular, it did not allow for the measurement of the college's success rates in supporting its former students to return and complete its courses, a performance indicator which is important because students who had been dissatisfied previously would be unlikely to return to the same college or course. As a measure of college effectiveness, this indicator should carry greater validity than the current practice of assessing performance by examining only the total withdrawal rates, because it would introduce a useful contextual element to the data. It would also provide a valuable indication of the extent of the 'interrupted learning' identified by McGivey (1996), which as Chapter 4 showed, occurs when students have lengthy periods of absence from a course and are categorised by the funding body and the Inspectorate as having left because they have not attended for more than four weeks. As Frank and Houghton (1997) found, such students often refuse to accept the label 'drop-out' because they intend to return, although it may not be until a subsequent academic year. Thus, further research into these issues will need to be undertaken by means of a more extensive range of specific questions about the date, location and course from which the previous withdrawal(s) occurred.

The need for further research is also apparent in areas where data gathered from the induction survey conflicted with other sources of evidence, including the results of another question in the same survey. The analysis of the potential influence of feeder schools on the students' perception of the college, in Tables 4.17 and 4.18, indicated that questions 11 and 12 (Appendix 1) may have encouraged the students to believe that a positive response was expected. Significantly, the results were inconsistent with those in Table 4.19 and with evidence from the focus groups with both staff and students, which suggested that the schools had left the students with a negative impression of the college. As the influence of feeder schools was noted in Chapter 2 in the review of the work of Page (1996; 1998), who conducted one of the few substantial investigations to be completed on the causes of withdrawal in an FE college, the inconclusive results in the current study suggest that further exploration of this issue is required.

The 'at risk' procedure

As Chapter 3 indicated, the 'at risk' procedure (Appendix 2) was designed to be an element of the research design which could also support the managerial solutions. The findings reported in Chapters 4 and 6 suggest that it made a contribution to both functions.

By asking tutors to provide a detailed explanation of the reason for leaving on 'Form 3' of the procedure, it produced data that could be triangulated with other sources of evidence, such as the single-cause reasons for leaving collected by the college (Tables 4.1 and 4.2) and the biographical interviews. It therefore served as a test of internal validity. Moreover, it complemented the range of methods within the research design in other ways: the initial identification on 'Form 1' of students believed to be most 'at risk' of withdrawal provided the sampling frame from which the biographical interviewees were selected.

However, its most significant impact appears to be in the commitment shown by tutors to the process. This was reflected in the accuracy of the data supplied on 'Form 3', which, as Chapter 4 has shown, was compared with an independent test conducted by the researcher of the reasons for leaving. It was also indicated by the quality of the tutors' contribution in the staff focus groups and in their decision to continue to use the 'at risk' procedure after the study had been completed and the researcher had left the college. The ownership of the exercise thus transferred from the researcher to the tutors and, in doing so, came to resemble a longer-term action research project which can be incorporated into the managerial solutions. As line 4b of Table 6.1 in Chapter 6 shows, data collated from 'Form 4' of the procedure indicate that over the three-year period of the study the withdrawal rate of students identified on 'Form 2' as being 'at risk' had reduced by 32.1%. Therefore, the research design itself appears to have contributed to the management of change by promoting among the tutors a recognition of the need for an improved understanding of the problem of student drop-out via the process of 'self reflective enquiry' (Carr and Kemmis 1986).

Nevertheless, if the 'at risk' procedure is to be employed across the case-study college, by staff other than the teaching team who helped to develop it, concerns about the extent to which students might experience the effects of negative labelling by tutors, together with the assertion that it is unethical to conceal their 'at risk' status from the identified individuals, will need to be addressed. Although a variety of 'at risk' procedures have been developed in a number of colleges (Martinez 1997), these concerns were voiced in opposition to the use of the technique in the case-study college by tutors in the Science Section who contributed to the Access programme and, consequently, delayed the inclusion of a sample of mature students until the final year of the data-gathering period. As Table 4.5 has shown, this restricted the proportion of students who were over 19 years of age to 20% of the survey population. While this was counterbalanced by the selection of a greater proportion of mature students in the biographical sample which had equal numbers of 16-19 and post-19 interviewees, including four members of the Access programme who provided a rich source of evidence about the barriers to completion which face their age group, a more evenly distributed age profile in the survey and 'at risk' populations would have provided an opportunity to explore the socio-economic circumstances of mature students in greater detail. Greater attention to the circumstances of mature students is necessary because, as Shah (1994) observed in her study of an Access programme, they 'do not constitute an homogeneous group, they inhabit enormously diverse histories and positions' (p.258). Similarly, another issue worthy of future attention would be to compare academic and vocational programmes to examine whether there are significant differences in the reasons for leaving.

The inclusion of vocational programmes was beyond the scope of this case-study, which, as Chapter 1 indicated, aimed to address the problem of high withdrawal rates in the researcher's sphere of managerial responsibility. However, the level of opposition shown by the Access tutors in the Science Section, who were members of the researcher's department, had not been anticipated. It is notable that tutors in the staff focus groups, who were the team which implemented the 'at risk' procedure, questioned the sincerity of the opposition and suggested that it stemmed more from the micro-political rivalry that existed between the curriculum areas than from a genuine

concern for the students. This appeared to have been exacerbated by the success achieved by the Humanities tutors in the national A Level Performance Tables and in the ALIS value added measures, which had been well publicised within the college. The fact that the researcher was a Humanities specialist who had managed that curricular section before being promoted to a post which included responsibility for Science programmes may have added further tension to the situation.

Bush's (2002) analysis of micropolitics suggests this example of conflict between two curriculum sections is a typical and natural outcome of the existence of competing interest groups which operate in educational organisations. It also illustrates the difficulty of attempting to extend a collegial approach to decision making beyond the small team who designed and implemented a new system. While Baldrige (1989) and Wallace (1989) argue that collegiality is the most desirable approach to decision making in educational organisations because, by drawing on the knowledge and expertise of professionals it should result, at least in theory, in a high level of commitment to a well-informed outcome agreed by consensus, they acknowledge that in practice it is very time consuming and difficult to achieve in its purest form even among small groups. Indeed, Hargreaves (1994) has suggested that collegiality is often 'contrived' to secure the acceptance by team members of an outcome desired by an individual who has greater bureaucratic authority within the hierarchy of the organisation.

Nevertheless, the decision taken by the Humanities team to continue with the 'at risk' procedure after the researcher had left the organisation suggests that any collegiality which did exist was genuine because if it had been contrived it is likely that the procedure would have been abandoned. However, as the literature suggests, the development of that collegiality may have depended on a level of stability which was rare in a college where a history of turbulence and ambiguity had resulted in the frequent changes of structure and personnel described in Chapter 1.

Unusually, the researcher had appointed all of the team members because he had occupied the post of Head of Section for more than 10 years. Having also worked in the same Section for 20 years, he had retained a modest

teaching timetable (which did not involve direct contact with students in the research population). Such a commitment can reinforce a sense of collegiality, as Hellawell and Hancock (2003) found in their study of academic middle managers in an HE setting:

‘It should also not be forgotten that in their teaching capacity (however small this might have now become in some cases), these middle managers are also the colleagues of those they manage, and may even play subordinate roles within particular course teams.’ (p.251)

In addition, while the researcher had maintained a policy of strategic compliance, his criticisms of the new managerialist approach had been articulated publicly (Palmer 2001a), and ultimately may even have contributed to his redundancy in a situation which was similar to that described in HE by Hellawell and Hancock (2003), who observed that when organisational restructuring occurs in ‘some ways these middle managers are more vulnerable than the staff they manage.’ (p.259)

Ironically, it may have been this stability and collegiality in the Humanities Section which provoked the resistance shown by the Science tutors. After they had joined the researcher’s department, the Science staff defended their opposition to the inclusion of Access to HE students in the investigation not only on ethical grounds but also by arguing that they wanted to develop their own solutions to problems such as retention rather than simply implementing ‘Humanities’ systems’. The political tension which can result from this rivalry was still apparent two months before the researcher was made redundant, when two prominent members of the Science team complained in a meeting with the Principal that they did not want Humanities’ systems ‘imposed’ on their Section. Again, a parallel can be drawn with the research of Hellawell and Hancock (2003) when they found that middle managers in HE faced a greater threat from sanctions, such as demotion, than their subordinates, who also may have contributed to their plight:

‘....some of the middle managers we interviewed felt that some of these demotions had followed resentment about the middle management expressed by the “rank and file” to the middle managers’ superiors. In other words, the

middle managers' positions were, they felt, vulnerable to attack from below as well as above.' (p.260)

Thus, the existence of this opposition, whether ethical or political in origin, demonstrates the need for sensitive consultation with other teams before changes can be introduced in other areas of the college. The scope for a managerial response to political opposition to the extension of retention improvement research strategies such as the 'at risk' procedure will be considered in Chapter 6, but the ethical issues will be addressed in the next section.

The biographical method

As the biographical summaries in Appendix 3 and the extracts in Chapters 4 and 6 show, this method provided a very fruitful source of data about the students' experience of leaving or completing a course. By doing so, the method addressed the 'question of voice – allowing the experience of groups who are not usually heard to be given' (Roberts 2002 p. 20) and, at the level of the individual student, helped to reveal 'the situational response of the self to daily interactional contingencies' (Denzin 1970 p.257). Indeed, the evidence from the biographical interviews illustrates the danger of generalising about that 'situational response' because the students who completed faced problems common to those who left. For example, while leavers such as Laura and Amanda had to contend with the restrictions imposed by the illness of a family member, this problem was also faced by Helen, Sandra and Mike who completed. Similarly, although Amanda left due to her own health problems, the completers Joanne, Anne and Jenny also suffered from ill-health. Equally, a history of previous dropping-out was not only restricted to Laura and Amanda, who left, but was also the experience of completers such as Joanne, Diane, Helen, Anne and Jenny.

The danger of allowing policy making to be informed by unsafe generalisations was also illuminated by the biographical method 'because of its capacity to interrogate the space between structures and agency' (Ozga 2000 p.126) and its 'potential to make a far reaching contribution to the perennial problem of understanding the links between "personal troubles" and "public issues" ' (Goodson 1983 p.152). By demonstrating that the

college had provided a significant level of support to the biographical interviewees in helping them to overcome their 'personal troubles', the case-study findings are consistent with the review of the literature in Chapter 2 in challenging the policy assumption that the 'public issue' of withdrawal is caused primarily by deficiencies in college practices. Despite being in the group deemed to have the greater risk of withdrawal, the majority of the interviewees completed. All mentioned the support of tutors and many indicated that a 'sense of achievement' had encouraged them to continue when they experienced doubts. In particular, Joanne valued the support and patience of her English tutor, who helped her to complete after having dropped out of GCSE and A Level courses on three previous occasions, while Paul's isolation was reduced by the teaching strategy employed by his Media Studies tutor. Similarly, both Jenny and Michelle found that the supportive environment of the college enabled them to overcome anxieties resulting from a history of bullying at school, while Rachel and Mike responded positively to being treated as adults. Equally, mature students such as Diane only completed one of her examinations because her tutor looked after her children, while Helen benefited from the individual tuition which helped her to cover work she had missed and the flexibility shown by Sandra's tutor over the minimum attendance requirements proved to be crucial.

Yet, the biographical method was also sufficiently sensitive to reveal the delicate interdependence of college-based and external sources of support which helped some interviewees to complete. Without the mutually-reinforcing support of tutors and friends outside the college, students such as Sandra, Helen and Rachel might have withdrawn. Their accounts illustrate the way in which the biographical method was able to identify the complex nexus of influences that can shape the actions of an individual agent when responding to the 'structure' provided by a college.

Nevertheless, the experience of using the biographical method did raise some issues which now require further analysis. The first concerns the extent to which the biographical process promoted a 'Hawthorne effect', whereby the interviewees' decision to complete the course was significantly influenced by the additional attention they received as a result of the

research project. This possibility was clearly evident in the case of Helen, who indicated that the biographical interviews may have contributed to her completion of the course because she valued the opportunity for reflection about her life and goals. For similar reasons, Mike asked whether he could continue with the interviews after the data collection had been completed, while James revealed that he looked forward to the interviews and often arrived with a written list of points he wished to discuss.

Meanwhile, several other students began to use the interviews not only for the purposes of self-reflection but also saw them as a means of communicating confidentially with members of the course team about matters they felt tutors may not have been aware. Examples included Anne's description of the potentially destructive tensions caused by the opposing factions within her group during the early stages of the programme, and Sandra's desire to defend her reputation by revealing the details of the malicious gossip about her 'malingering', which had temporarily undermined her credibility with her tutor. Significantly, the students who revealed the details of the malicious gossip advised her to bring the information to the next interview in addition to telling her tutor. Thus, even students who were not directly involved in the interviews began to regard them as an important alternative channel of communication. This suggests that the interviews appear to have been perceived either as a form of privileged access to the head of department who was conducting the interviews, or at least as a means of winning the support of a sympathetic listener who would, if necessary, intercede on behalf of the student. Whatever their motives, it appears that for these students the interviews had become more than a research exercise.

Although for these students the outcome of the interviews was positive in that it may have helped them to complete their courses, the possibility that a 'Hawthorne effect' was present does have implications for the managerial response. As the retention rate of the 14 biographical students was 23.7 % higher than the average for the survey population of this study, it suggests that future students might benefit from improvements to the existing tutorial arrangements. These could be modelled on aspects of the biographical interviewing process by extending the opportunities for students to conduct,

on an individual basis with tutors, a dialogue which incorporates periodic reflection about progress made in overcoming potential obstacles to completion. Where necessary, this could be linked to other retention improvement initiatives discussed in Chapter 6, such as Motivational Interviewing.

The debate about the ‘Hawthorne effect’ also raises the related issue of whether the increased attention paid by tutors to students on the ‘at risk’ register, which also provided the biographical sample, led, unintentionally, to the neglect of students who were outside those groups. While the attention paid by the researcher to the interviewees could not have disadvantaged any other students because it was additional to any support that was offered normally by the college, the ‘at risk’ procedure had the potential to prompt a ‘Hawthorne effect’ with the tutors because they could have felt obliged to prove their effectiveness by concentrating on the individuals who had been identified for extra assistance to the exclusion of the other students. To test for this possible effect, the data shown in Table 5.1 were extracted from in Table 6.1 in Chapter 6 for further analysis. These data were collated from ‘Form 4’ of the ‘at risk’ procedure and provided a comparison of the retention rates of students who were deemed to be ‘at risk’ with those outside that group. As the withdrawal rate of the students who were not ‘at risk’ (line 6b) increased marginally by 6.9 % only in the second year of the study and then returned in the final year to a figure of 4.4 % below the starting point of the project, and was still 16.6 % below the withdrawal rate of those ‘at risk’ (line 4b) by the end of the research, despite an overall reduction in the withdrawal of ‘at risk’ students of 32.1 % (line 4b), it suggests that the former had not suffered any significant deterioration in the quality of support offered by tutors.

Table 5.1 Extract from Table 6.1: Operation of the ‘at risk’ procedure

	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02
4b) % of ‘at risk’ students who withdrew/total number at risk	75	74.3	42.9
6b) % not ‘at risk’ who withdrew/total students who were not at risk	30.7	37.6	26.3

However, when the question of ethics was then applied to the biographical interviews a number of other issues did emerge. In terms of the criteria of ethically acceptable research practice outlined by Bryman (2001), the most serious of these issues occurred around the boundaries of 'informed consent' and 'deception'. Although informed consent had been sought from all students involved in the biographical interviews, they had been told that the focus of the interviews was to explore their experience of college life and to compare it with their previous educational careers and family histories. They were informed that the purpose of the exercise was to identify ways in which the college could provide more effective support for students by examining their experiences and that they had been selected at random. However, by the end of the process, and after discussing the matter informally with other biographical interviewees on her programme, Helen had recognised that the students selected for the interviews had not been chosen at random but because they shared challenging circumstances. Thus, the researcher was faced with the ethical dilemma of whether to maintain the deception about the sampling procedure and the real purpose of the interviews.

After careful consideration and consultation with the team of tutors who had participated in the research design, a decision was taken to continue with the deception. This decision was based on the belief that to reveal the true focus of the interviews and the sampling criteria, could damage the interests of the students because it might undermine their self esteem and increase their already high probability of withdrawal. Thus, a self-fulfilling prophecy might have been created.

This ethical dilemma had also been addressed before the study commenced because the methodology had been designed to conform to the Statement of Ethical Practice issued by the British Sociological Association (BSA) (1992), which indicates that researchers 'should strive to protect the rights of those they study, their interests, sensitivities and privacy, while recognising the difficulty of balancing potentially conflicting interests' (BSA 1992 p.704). In this case, the 'potentially conflicting interests' occurred in the balance between the need to protect the interests of the interviewees and the need to understand the causes of student withdrawal in

order to identify effective solutions to the problem. Unless solutions could be identified, the interests of future students could be threatened, not only by a continuation of high rates of withdrawal, but also by a funding body and Inspectorate that had both defined drop-out as 'a problem' and were prepared to impose sanctions which could lead ultimately to the withdrawal of the provision and a serious reduction in the opportunities available to the population of a highly disadvantaged area.

This conflict of interests had also applied to the 'at risk' procedure, where it had been decided that even the existence of the process had to remain confidential because it was feared that the students would perceive the exercise as a form of negative labelling rather than an attempt to identify those most in need of support. However, the tutors involved in the process felt that complete confidentiality was ethically acceptable because the students could gain from the targeted support but they would not benefit from being informed that they had a high risk of withdrawal. By contrast, the ethical dilemma had occurred with the ambiguity about the declared purpose and sampling procedure of the biographical interviews precisely because partial information had to be released.

Nevertheless, some reassurance about the acceptability of this ethical compromise was found in the literature about research methodology. As Bryman (2001) notes:

'It is rarely feasible or desirable to provide participants with a totally complete account of what your research is about..... it is very difficult to know where the line should be drawn...' (p.484)

Similarly, Cohen et al. (2000) in drawing on the concept of the ethical 'costs/benefits ratio' (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias 1992), suggest that:

'The process of balancing benefits against possible costs is chiefly a subjective one and not at all easy. There are few or no absolutes and researchers have to make decisions about research content and procedures in accordance with professional and personal values. This *costs/benefits ratio* is

the basic dilemma residual in a great deal of social research.’
(Cohen et al. 2000 p.50)

From their analysis of the problem they conclude that:

‘The principle that subjects ought not to leave the research situation with greater anxiety or lower levels of self-esteem than they came with is a good one to follow.....Desirably, subjects should be enriched by the experience and should leave it with the feeling that they have learned something.’
(ibid. p. 64)

The fact that Helen, while suspecting the true purpose of the research, felt that the opportunity for reflection provided by the biographical interviews had helped her to complete the course would appear to satisfy this principle.

Meanwhile, the other ethical issues which emerged during the research are grouped together in the BSA (1992) Guidelines under the sub-heading: ‘anonymity, privacy and confidentiality’. The first example relates to the balance between the need to protect an individual’s right to privacy and the confidentiality of his/her personal situation with the search for truth and accuracy. The omission of important information about the probable reasons for her withdrawal by one student, Laura, serves as a remainder that the biographies were a ‘social construction’. It also illustrates the benefits of a triangulated research design because the information, which was omitted in the biographical interviews, was revealed to a mature, female member of the Student Services Department. This information was then shared with the researcher after it had become clear during discussions with Laura’s tutors that there were inconsistencies in her biographical account, which alleged that she had withdrawn mainly because the Student Services Department had denied her financial assistance. The decision by the member of the Student Services Department to reveal the details of the significant recent changes in her personal life resulted from a sense that Laura had distorted the truth and betrayed the trust of someone who had made strenuous efforts to help her by arranging very generous funding to support Laura’s need for childcare. Nevertheless, the episode points to the ethical difficulty of defining the boundaries of confidentiality when a deliberate omission appears to have been made by Laura.

Laura's case also demonstrates the problems of ownership of the biographical account. For the purposes of satisfying the ethical obligation to safeguard the interests of the respondents and to seek internal validity, it was the practice during this study to check the accuracy of previous accounts at the start of each subsequent interview. At this stage, although the account had been constructed via varying degrees of collaboration between the interviewee and the researcher, the life story was still owned by the former. However, when triangulated evidence was introduced from other sources during the preparation of the final version it became a life history, which, in practice, was owned by the researcher. If, as in Laura's case, the new information was contentious or of a confidential nature, and had not been revealed to the researcher by the interviewee, it then became impossible to show her the revised account for approval. This then imposes an ethical requirement on the researcher to ensure that any public version of the account does not include sufficiently distinctive information to breach confidentiality by enabling others to recognise the identity of its subject.

An even more sensitive example of the ethical need to protect the anonymity, privacy and confidentiality of the subject occurred in the case of Diane, who, understandably, omitted to reveal details of complex personal problems which were related to the breakdown of her marriage. These events were very relevant to the biographical account of her experience of the course because she had decided to withdraw until her (female) tutor intervened and persuaded her to return. Her tutor felt that it was necessary to breach confidentiality by revealing this information to the researcher because she feared that, unwittingly, the interviewer could cause further distress by the use of probing questions, and the encounter could also negate the beneficial effects of the support provided by the tutor in helping Diane to return to the course 'and rebuild her life.' The possession of this knowledge did impose significant constraints on the topics discussed in subsequent interviews, and inevitably resulted in an incomplete account of Diane's reasons for continuing, but there was no ethical alternative to this self-censorship by the interviewer: the well-being of the interviewee had to take priority. Nevertheless, the episode does illustrate the risk of drifting into a situation which might have required the services of a trained counsellor rather than a trainee interviewer. With the rapport which can

develop as a result of the longitudinal nature of the biographical interviewing process, in contrast to the single encounter of a more traditional interview, this risk would appear to be amplified.

Diane's case provides a very clear illustration of the ethical requirement to protect the anonymity of the subject. Even with the use of pseudonyms, which were employed in this study, there is a risk that, due to the nature of the highly specific details contained within Diane's personal history, she could be identified if the material were to be published or even merely used as case study material for training purposes within the college. The sense of betrayal resulting from such a revelation has been vividly portrayed recently by Clough (2002) via his use of a fictional account of an encounter with a relative of one of his biographical interviewees following the latter's discovery that the true identity of 'Klaus' could be recognised in a publication. Thus, there is an ethical obligation to suppress any details that might identify individuals such as Diane, but, in doing so, some of the potentially important insights revealed by the richness of the original data, which might only be accessible through this method, and distinguish it from more established research strategies, are lost.

The focus groups

The focus groups provided a wide range of data from students, tutors and staff based in a key cross-college function. The focus groups of student completers yielded extensive evidence about the impact of factors such as parental support, feeder schools and the paradoxical qualities of the college culture. As the analysis of the findings in Chapter 4 showed, this enabled comparisons to be drawn with data from other sources and, in doing so, identified a serious flaw in the induction survey in the construction of several questions about the influence of feeder schools on students' perception of the case-study college. While their evidence offered insights into their reasons for completing, they also presented useful suggestions for improvement in areas such as initial guidance and counselling and the induction process, which have been incorporated into the managerial response in Chapter 6. By contrast, the tutor focus groups began by acting as an expert panel which helped to construct research instruments such as the induction survey and the 'at risk' procedure, and later, while evaluating

the results of the pilot study, were instrumental in the addition of a survey question about a student's history of withdrawal from previous courses that subsequently provided the most important finding from the questionnaire. Meanwhile, the Student Services focus groups provided a detailed analysis of the organisational issues which needed to be addressed as part of the implementation of a retention improvement strategy.

Nevertheless, despite making an important contribution to the study, a number of refinements to the student focus groups could be introduced. The reasons for the limited number of Access students who participated in the study have been discussed earlier in this chapter, but the modest number who did join the focus groups during the final year of the study did not make as significant an impact as did their mature counterparts among the biographical interviewees. The majority of the comments from the focus groups which are quoted in Chapters 4 and 6 appear to have been made by the AS/A Level students. The dominance within the groups of these students could be due to uneven moderation, which encouraged some students to contribute at the expense of others. Equally, it could also be explained by the fact that most of the AS/A Level students knew each other before they participated, because their course timetables overlapped to a much greater extent than the focus group members drawn from the Access and GCSE programmes

Therefore, the solution would appear to be to restrict focus group membership to students from a single programme rather than combining students from different courses in the same group. In addition to reducing the sense of isolation which some students may have experienced when they did not know any other members of the group, this should have the effect of improving the quality of the discussion because the participants would be more likely to have common interests and a shared knowledge of course-related matters. As Morgan (1997) has noted, the potential disadvantage of this arrangement is that where members know each other well the discussion could rely on a number of taken-for-granted assumptions, which could present problems for later analysis of the content. Thus, effective moderation would be required to encourage group members to articulate the meanings which lie behind these assumptions.

Another refinement which could be made to the methodology would be to convene a focus group of the biographical interviewees. This could provide an opportunity to identify and discuss common aspects of the students' life histories such as barriers to completion, their response to those obstacles and the level of support they had received from the college. Such a discussion could then be cross-referenced to subsequent individual interviews and might stimulate new lines of enquiry.

The secondary data

Although the value added data supplied by Durham University provided a valuable supply of independent evidence from which to conduct an analysis of the potential links between prior attainment, level of commitment and withdrawal rates, the college-based sources of secondary data proved to be problematic. For example, the single cause reasons for leaving, which tutors submit electronically via e-mail to the college's MIS Department, had to be gathered manually from the tutors for the purposes of this research because the data were not available or accessible on the college's computerised records. While this was inconvenient for the researcher, a more significant aspect of this problem is that the time required to repeat the exercise, by constructing a separate set of manual records, discourages tutors from analysing trends which could inform the development of future retention improvement strategies. This issue is pursued in Chapter 6 in relation to the managerial response.

A similar problem was evident when absence trends and retention rates were sought at subject level. The need to collect data manually from a large number of registers stored on a range widely dispersed college sites, despite the fact that the data are entered on to a central electronic system by a team of clerks, effectively prevents tutors from identifying such trends until the end of the year, by which time the students with attendance problems have left and the exercise becomes 'academic' in every sense. As Martinez (1997) notes:

"MIS systems need to satisfy teachers' needs as well as managers' and external stakeholders'. They need information on student progress, patterns of attendance and withdrawal,

and comparator information for reviewing their own activity.’

(p136)

Meanwhile, as the managerial recommendations in Chapter 6 indicate, the restoration of the Attendance Monitoring Officer posts, accompanied by more effective role clarification and training, would help to compensate for the tutor’s lack of access to centrally stored information.

Although the manual collection of the reasons for leaving and register data proved to be unnecessarily laborious, another source of potentially valuable data was unusable for the purposes of this study. In common with most institutions in the FE sector, the Student Perception of Course (SPOC) questionnaires are completed by students three times per year as part of the college’s quality system, and the responses can yield valuable evaluative data about initial guidance and counselling, induction and on-programme issues. However, as the format of the questions was altered on three occasions during the period of this study, including one change between the first and second questionnaires in the same academic year, the data sets were neither compatible nor complete. These changes appear to be symptomatic of the extreme turbulence experienced by the college in recent years that was described in Chapter 1. The continuation of this turbulence was evident during the final year of this study, when, due to two ‘resignations’, the role of Head of the MIS Department was occupied by three different post holders during a 10 month period. (The first of these sudden departures also prevented the completion of an interview which had been planned between the Head of MIS and the researcher.) Such problems suggest a need for greater stability and consistency of approach if retention improvement strategies are to succeed.

The role of the researcher

Having evaluated the methodology and the data it provided, it is now appropriate to turn to the part played by the values and role of the researcher. As Goodson and Sikes (2001) have observed, ‘since the 1980s, it has become common practice for qualitative researchers in general to “write themselves into” their research, on the grounds that personal, background information will enhance the rigour of their work by making potential biases explicit’ (p.34). They believe that this practice is especially necessary for

researchers who are involved in biographical and life history studies ‘where informants’ lives are revealed, perhaps it is only “fair” that researchers’ lives are too – at least, in so far as what is told is really relevant to the project in question’ (p35) and does not result in ‘vanity ethnography’ (Maynard 1993, p.329). Similarly, Scott and Usher (1999) note that, as there is an interpretive process at work for both the biographer as well as the interviewee, ‘the interpreted account is therefore only one of many interpretations which could be made’ (p119). This serves as an important reminder that a researcher who is based inside the organisation being studied should be cognizant not only of the influence of his/her own values but also of the impact of his/her managerial power over the subjects of the study. This can influence many aspects of the research process, from providing privileged access to staff, students and documents to the perception respondents hold about the researcher as a hierarchical figure in the organisation.

As that role, and the managerial authority which accompanied it, changed dramatically due to the sudden, and completely unforeseen redundancy of the researcher six months before the end of the data collection period, it is that element of the researcher’s biography which should be examined. While continued access to students in the research cohort was guaranteed as part of a redundancy compensation package, and links with tutors and staff in the Student Services and Quality Departments were maintained via a part-time teaching contract, the role of the researcher changed from that of manager who was an ‘insider’ to that of a detached visitor. Although this change was accompanied by the disadvantage of no longer having direct access to confidential management data which could support the evaluation of pedagogic practices, such as the lesson observation grades of tutors, it did offer the opportunity to take a more reflective and dispassionate view of the potential influence of college-based factors, because the researcher no longer had a vested interest in defending the institution.

However, the circumstances of the researcher’s sudden departure from his full-time post meant that it was no longer feasible to proceed with planned interviews with either the Principal or a member of the Senior Management Team (SMT), although many of the issues raised by the research relate

decisions taken by those individuals. Therefore, when faced with an absence of evidence from these key figures, the researcher became acutely aware of the need to prevent potential biases, resulting from recent events in his biography, from influencing the objectivity of his judgements and the rigour of his work.

CHAPTER 6 THE MANAGERIAL RESPONSE

This chapter will address the fourth research question in this investigation:

What are the implications for the design of retention improvement strategies?

In considering the managerial response, which has emerged from the results of the first three research questions, the focus will move from the particular to the general, by starting with recommendations for improvements in professional practice by tutors and staff who provide student support before proceeding to consider the implications for senior management within the case-study college. A separate, concluding chapter will then examine the relevance of the findings to policy making in FE at national level.

The recommended managerial response drew not only on the literature (Martinez 1997; Kenwright 1997) and the reflections of tutors and support staff but also sought the advice of those who experienced and completed the learning process. As the research design in Chapter 3 indicated, students' reasons for completing can be as revealing about the effectiveness of teaching and support strategies and the inter-relationship with the impact of the habitus as the explanations for withdrawal provided by those who leave. From this evidence, opportunities for development or improvement in tutorial and student support practices were identified within the case-study college.

Although the managerial recommendations made within the retention improvement strategy are based on evidence drawn from the literature and on insights gained from data collected from students and staff in the college, it is necessary to exercise caution at this stage. The recommendations are tentative because, with the exception of the 'at risk' procedure, they have yet to be implemented and therefore have not been tested empirically. Indeed, even judgements about the effectiveness of the 'at risk' procedure must remain provisional because a positive trend emerged only in its third year of operation. Thus, before secure conclusions can be reached about the contribution made by the retention improvement strategy to any reduction in

student withdrawal, further data will need to be collected after the recommendations have been implemented.

The recommendations cover the following areas of college practice:

Initial guidance and counselling

In Chapter 4, Table 4.2 indicated that, of the reasons for leaving which could be attributed directly to factors within the control of the college, 'transferring to a different course' had the highest frequency. While this could be regarded as a strength rather than a weakness in that the college was sufficiently responsive to help students move to a more suitable programme rather than losing them completely, it is a process which can be accompanied by anxiety resulting from the disadvantage of joining and adjusting to the demands of another course after it has started. On some occasions the transfer is unsuccessful because the student is unable to adjust and then does leave the college. Therefore, a reduction in the number of transfers, which amounted to almost one tenth of all withdrawals from the programmes in the study, would appear to be desirable.

To reduce the number of transfers to other courses a range of measures could be introduced. These include the preparation of more detailed course descriptions on the information leaflets which are issued to students when they enquire about programmes of study. This should enable students to gain an improved understanding of not only the course content but also the nature and extent of the assessed work, and it could also contribute to a reduction in withdrawals in other categories such as 'took on too much' and 'course too hard', which each amounted to 1% of the total shown in Table 4.2. Such concerns about the volume of work were evident in the comments made by the student focus groups:

'People who left early on thought it was going to be easier—they should have had more information.' (Completers focus group 2)

'You should spend more time with students explaining that you have to do homework every week.' (Completers focus group 4)

‘I wanted to leave during induction because the amount of work sounded scary. Fortunately I stayed as it was only later on during the course that I realised I could cope.’

(Completers focus group 6)

In the case-study college, proposals to develop more informative leaflets have been resisted previously by the Marketing Department due to fears that students might be deterred from enrolling on a course which appeared to be very difficult, but a student who is better informed about the commitment required might be less likely to transfer to another course or to find that the course is too demanding. By contrast, the staff focus group felt additional information was especially important in unfamiliar subjects such as Media Studies, Sociology and Psychology, which were not normally offered by schools as part of the 11-16 curriculum, and whose appeal in FE was sometimes based on a desire to avoid continuing with a subject they disliked rather the pursuit of a new-found interest. As the unfamiliar subjects tended to have a higher withdrawal rate than those on the school-based curriculum, the tutors’ focus group felt that:

‘You almost need to try and put them off subjects they have not taken at school in order to test the strength of their interest in the subject.’

The use of more detailed leaflets would also help to overcome the problems caused by the number of students who, as Table 4.24 indicated, delay their application to the college until the later stages of the enrolment period when, due to pressure of numbers, tutors with specialist knowledge of the programme can spend less time with each enquiry. This pattern was observed by one of the students, who was honest in acknowledging his own contribution to the problem:

‘The advice I received before I enrolled was brief, but it was a bit late when I applied.’ (Completers focus group 6)

Although the college has attempted to regulate the flow of enquiries by enrolling throughout the summer period and offering incentives for early enrolment, the pattern of enquiries has remained largely unchanged. An alternative solution, which was suggested by the students, could include the

payment of those who have completed the course successfully to answer queries about the nature of workload:

‘I think this college should have past students telling you at enrolment just how much work is involved.’

(Completers focus group 1)

The use of advisers who were of a similar age to the enquirers might also inspire greater confidence about the feasibility of satisfying the demands of the course and help to raise aspirations. Moreover, another student suggested that this approach could be extended to address also the effects of the negative comments made about the college by staff in the feeder schools:

‘Students who have succeeded at this college could go back to their old schools to correct the teachers who tell the pupils that despite the good results at the FE college there are far more who leave with nothing.’ (Completers focus group 5)

On programme support outside the classroom

As the college does not have a means of explaining the reason for the 5% of total withdrawals from the case-study cohort (Table 4.2) occurring during the induction period, the revival of a system based on the Tutorial Support Assistants (TSAs), which existed previously and was described in Chapter 3, might help to identify possible improvements to the content and process of induction and simultaneously encourage anxious students to continue attending. They could also make a significant contribution in other periods of the academic year, and especially during September and October when, as Table 4.3 has shown, the majority of withdrawals occur. Their separation from the classroom offers the college an opportunity to explore impartially and confidentially the extent to which the organisation could have been more effective in supporting the high proportion of students who left for personal reasons or to obtain a job.

Careers guidance

One form of support which might help such students is a more systematic approach to careers guidance. The withdrawal data in Table 4.2 indicate that the attraction of full-time work is very strong and is the main reason for

leaving. In households where there is no direct experience of occupational success resulting from education the appeal of an immediate job, even if it is poorly paid and insecure, is understandable, especially in an area which has a long history of higher than average levels of unemployment. For the college the fundamental challenge posed by this context would appear to be raise aspirations and to encourage more students to benefit from the exceptional levels of value added which, as the analysis by Durham University (2002) and Greenhead College (2002) has shown, are already being achieved by completers

One strategy which could address this challenge would be to extend the provision of careers advice in order to highlight the opportunities which are associated with successful completion. As Tables 4.19 and 4.23 revealed, very few students appear to have benefited from such advice before they joined the college. The consequences were clearly evident in some of the biographical interviews. Matt's frequent changes of direction from one unrelated course to another before his eventual withdrawal, following the confusing and often conflicting advice he received from his parents, was described in Chapter 4. His record demonstrates a number of the 'sudden transformations' which resemble the apparently whimsical changes of direction made by the 16-18 year old students in Bloomer and Hodkinson's (1997,1999) study of the transition from school to FE. Matza's (1964) concept of 'drift' also seems to apply to Matt's learning career because he appeared to lack the capacity or the inclination to become the agent of his own destiny. Having insisted throughout four interviews that he 'wouldn't take just any job', ultimately Matt did precisely the opposite by leaving college to start 'a temporary dead-end job which is very boring but easy'. Although a change in his personal circumstances was the immediate cause of this decision, his 'aimless drift' had started even before he left school. His case is an illustration of a student who had an urgent need for independent advice about his career aims.

The need for careers advice was not confined to students who withdrew. Jenny, another biographical interviewee also exhibited a tendency to experience the sudden transformations described by Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997, 1999). At the start of the academic year, after watching a

natural history programme while she had been in hospital, Jenny had expressed a desire to work in a zoo, but by the time of her next interview her aim had changed to establishing and writing for an animal rights magazine after she had become involved in a protest group which campaigned about the issue. However, in later interviews this aim had shifted to working as a counsellor after observing the breakdown of her sister's marriage to a violent partner.

Such rapid changes of direction, which appeared to be a whimsical response to the events occurring in her habitus immediately before each interview rather than long-term plans informed by a realistic assessment of the preparations required for entry into these occupations, suggest that, like Matt, Jenny might have benefited from objective, professional guidance. Moreover, by drawing on the insights offered by the completers focus groups about the benefits to be derived from involving previous recipients of successful guidance and counselling in the enrolment process, the impact of careers advice could be reinforced during tutorial sessions by visits from past students who have gained career progression as a result of their achievements at the college and, subsequently, at university.

Nevertheless, Watts (2001), in reviewing the aims of the development of the Connexions Service, has sounded a note of caution about the impartiality of such careers advice and its purpose. While attempting to promote the policy objective of social inclusion, there is the danger that educational and career 'solutions' proposed by the Service could become a form of social control and 'co-ordinated surveillance' (Watts 2001, p.171) unless the advisor respects the individual's freedom to reject the guidance and choose withdrawal as an alternative.

EMAs

Meanwhile, to reduce withdrawals relating to 'starting a job' (30%) and 'financial problems' (6 %), several forms of on-programme support outside the classroom have already been introduced. Evidence from the biographical interviews and focus groups suggests that these measures have been only partially successful. While significant support towards the cost of her child had been provided by the college's Student Services Department

and had been a key element in helping both Helen and Sandra to complete their Access courses, Laura withdrew despite receiving unusually generous support, which included payments throughout the summer holiday period in order to secure the continuity of care in a nursery which was equipped to cater for her daughter's special needs. Nevertheless, as Chapter 4 has shown, Laura's withdrawal appeared to be linked to only partly-revealed changes which were occurring in her personal life rather than to financial problems.

However, for younger students, who did not have children, financial support was more limited. Although the college was situated in one of the second-phase pilot areas for education maintenance allowances (EMA), only 8 % of the survey population had received the award. This was largely due to the fact that only 16 year old school leavers were eligible. The majority of the students in this study had either joined the college after dropping out of a course elsewhere or had enrolled in the years before the EMA pilot had begun. However, as students in one of the completers focus groups found, in some cases even 16 year olds from low income families experienced difficulty in completing the application process due to the 'natural parent rule', which is means-tested on the basis of parental rather than household income. If the absent parent could not be traced, or would not co-operate in completing the application, students did not qualify for an award. Even for the minority who did receive the award, such as the biographical interviewees Jenny and Mike, the impact was reduced by the delays in payment they experienced due to administrative difficulties encountered by the LEA, a problem, which national evaluation reports (Fletcher and Clay 2002; Maguire et al 2002) found, was common in many of the other pilot areas.

While evidence from these reports, and at local level from the focus groups with the Student Services Team and course tutors, suggested that the retention rates of students who received EMAs were higher than for those who did not qualify for the awards, the achievement rates suffered because some students regarded the award as an attendance allowance rather than as an incentive to complete assignments. Fletcher and Clay (2002) found that 'some colleges reported pockets of non-achievement where students viewed

mere attendance, which guarantees the weekly allowance, as sufficient' (p.4), while the Student Services Team in the case-college believed that the apparent improvement in retention following the introduction of EMAs may have been misleading because some students were manipulating the system:

'Many of the EMA students have been putting in sick note after sick note. This is not raising achievement but it does, in theory, help retention.'

Nevertheless the Student Services Team did acknowledge that deficiencies in the college's internal organisation had contributed to the problem:

'The college's system fell down because there was no means of tracking these cases and finding out what the problem really was. We just took the sick notes and did not investigate.'

This suggests that while a widening of the national criteria for eligibility might improve retention rates among a broader range of students, it would need to be accompanied by the introduction of a requirement relating to the submission of coursework, which would also have to be supported within the college by an effective and co-ordinated monitoring mechanism.

However, the introduction of EMAs does not guarantee that students will reduce their hours of paid work. Davies (1999) found that even if 16-19 year olds were offered a grant of £40 per week, more than half indicated that it would make no difference to the number of paid hours they would work. While the addition of a restriction on the number of part-time hours of employment students could undertake to qualify for an EMA might allay the fears of staff in the case-study college, and of principals elsewhere (Times Educational Supplement 24 January 2003), by helping to improve achievement, this measure would be difficult to enforce in a setting where as, Chapter 4 has shown, some students are already reluctant to reveal details of their levels of commitment to paid work.

On-programme support: pastoral issues

The analysis of the findings in Chapter 4 revealed that 53% of leavers and 37% of completers from the 2001-2002 cohort had previously left a course either at the case-study college or elsewhere without completing. Similarly, Table 4.24 indicated that the majority of all students did not apply for a

place on a full-time course until the month before it was due to start and over one third of leavers applied in September when the course was about to begin. The inference which was drawn from these findings was that the decision to attend the college was taken belatedly by many students, with only limited time to consider the commitment required and, therefore, a high risk of further drop-out. This illustrates the need for an effective system of pastoral support which can help students to meet challenges posed by demanding courses.

Evidence from the biographical interviews suggested that recent improvements in the existing pastoral system had helped 'at risk' students to complete. Three of the four Access biographical interviewees who were deemed to be 'at risk' acknowledged the contribution made by the support of their personal tutor in helping them to stay on their programmes. Helen reported that her tutor had been very flexible with deadlines and had provided individual tuition to cover the work she had missed while attending to her son's complicated medical problems, while Sandra's tutor had relaxed the minimum attendance requirement of 80% to enable her to complete the course despite malicious accusations made by another student that Sandra had fabricated the reason for her frequent absences and was malingering. Although Diane missed her first examination due to her sister-in-law's last-minute failure to honour a promise to look after her children, she had been encouraged to continue with her second examination when her personal tutor had collected Diane's children and looked after them in the college staffroom. (The fourth Access student differed from the other three in that she did not rely to the same extent on her tutor because her husband fully supported her decision to take the course and was prepared to care for their children whenever she needed quiet study time at home.)

Meanwhile, the importance of tutor support in helping 'at risk' students was apparent on other programmes. Joanne had dropped out on so many occasions previously that her case had been used as the first example on 'Form 3' of the 'at risk' procedure (Appendix 2). Her educational career had included a history of bullying throughout her secondary schooling, an unsympathetic reaction from her teachers and a negative assessment of her prospects by her careers adviser who suggested that she 'had no hope' of

achieving her ambition to be a teacher. The difficulties resulting from this experience were compounded by frequent asthma attacks. Having started a resit GCSE course three times before finally completing, she then dropped out of her first A Level course, but returned, completed her programme and progressed to a primary education degree course at a local HE college.

In a later interview, one year after she had progressed to her degree course, Joanne indicated that her success in finally completing her FE courses after so many false starts was due to the support and patience of her English tutor and to the fact that the college was prepared to risk further damage to its performance indicators if she dropped out again. Indeed, a further illustration of the true extent of her tutor's patient support is that Joanne indicated that she was considering whether to leave her HE college because her new lecturers had been far less supportive than her FE tutor. She was particularly unhappy that, having been absent from her degree course for five weeks with a chest infection, during which she had been 'really ill for three weeks and then two weeks coughing and not sleeping properly', Joanne's teaching placement had complained to her HE college and had forced her to return 'before she was ready.' Joanne's educational history and expectations demonstrate both the pastoral challenges facing tutors and the strategic dilemma facing the FE college as a whole when it is trying to implement national policy priorities such as widening participation and support episodes of interrupted learning caused by external factors while improving its performance indicators to avoid 'naming and shaming.'

Two further examples of the range of significant challenges posed to the pastoral system and the college by students were presented by James and Mike, who arrived with quite different, but equally serious, problems in their 'familial habitus.' James, whose chronological account in the opening biographical interview revealed considerable bitterness about the collapse of his parents' marriage when he was a teenager, sought to attribute his chances of educational success to external factors such as luck and/or the quality of teaching. He showed a readiness to blame most of his previous teachers at both school and sixth form college despite acknowledging that during his final two years at secondary school he was frequently caught drinking alcohol and had been suspended on a number of occasions for

smoking in class. In terms of Weiner's (1979) analysis, the apparent absence of internal attribution in his account placed James at risk of withdrawal because he appeared to believe that he has little control over his educational progress.

This reluctance to take responsibility for his own learning continued during his two year A Level course and he failed to meet deadlines frequently. Although he attended classes regularly he remained a rather isolated, unhappy individual who found it difficult to relate other students. His interviews were dominated by reflections on his dissatisfaction with his home life and how it had a negative impact on his course:

‘What happens at home definitely has an effect on how I
feel about college.’

Occasionally, however, his home life had an unintentionally beneficial effect on his work. To his surprise he gained an A grade in his AS Level General Studies, which he later attributed to a desire to prove a point to his father who, on the day before the examination, had suggested to James that he was not as talented as his younger sister. Nevertheless, this effect was short lived and his work rate declined to the point where he gained the minimum A Level grades required to enter a degree course at a local university. As his FE course progressed, James had become increasingly dependent on his tutors and the college in general:

‘The college gives me a routine and a reason for getting
up—you get used to seeing the same people every day.’

Indeed, by the time he completed his course his tutors were concerned that he had become so dependent that he would not be able to achieve a successful transition to university and would become an early leaver during the next stage of his educational career. However, since progressing to an HE institution he has successfully completed his first year of a degree course.

By contrast, Mike had been placed on the ‘at risk’ register because he had arrived at the college with low attainment in his GCSEs and a record of numerous periods of absence from school due to illness and family problems. His mother, who was divorced from his father, had given birth to Mike when she was 17 and had a history of severe depression. She had

threatened to commit suicide on a number of occasions and was under the care of a psychiatrist. Tensions had built up in the home to such an extent that both Mike and his sister were being monitored by social workers when he started his college course, and he had been prescribed anti-depressants in order to cope with his mother's self-harming behaviour.

To the frustration of his tutor, Mike failed to meet coursework deadlines in English Language and could not be entered for the examination. Although he did take examinations in several other subjects he did not achieve GCSE pass grades. However, Mike did make significant progress in other respects. When asked why he had completed a course which had proved so challenging he indicated that he saw the college as a means 'of getting out of the house and being independent, living a life of my own.' He also wanted 'to prove to my mum that I'm not like my dad who she thinks is a nobody.' On reflection he felt that attending college had made a very significant contribution to his personal development and had helped him to gain a greater sense of control over his own destiny. This had helped him 'to manage his anger at home' and as a result he was no longer under the supervision of a social worker. Mike had also sought and acted upon the advice of staff in the college's Student Services Department who suggested that moving to live with his grandmother might help him to acquire a degree of independence within a supportive setting. Despite his disappointing GCSE results he returned to college in the following year to join a Basic Engineering Foundation course and asked if he could continue with the biographical interviews because he found them both interesting and revealing.

The accounts from biographical interviewees, such as Joanne, James and Mike, illustrate the very challenging nature of the problems they faced in their personal lives while attempting to complete their college courses. Their life stories also demonstrate at an individual level the effectiveness of the support offered by tutors via the 'at risk' system. This suggests that despite the difficulty of predicting accurately the students who are most likely to withdraw, the practice of targeting support from a very early point in the academic year towards those who appear to be in greatest need has enhanced the pastoral care system. Although the 'at risk' procedure is still at

a developmental stage, there is evidence to suggest that its benefits extended beyond the biographical interviewees.

The 'at risk' system

Extracted from 'Form 4' of the 'at risk' procedure, the data in Table 6.1 indicate that, during the three years in which the system has developed, tutors have become more effective in retaining students who had been identified as being 'at risk' by improving the completion rate from 10.7% to 48.6%. Over the same period, this contributed to an overall reduction in drop-out among all students from 46.3% to 30.8%. However, as the data for 2000-01 indicate, this success was not immediate: during the second year of the scheme rates of withdrawal increased. This suggests that tutors needed time to develop diagnostic skills and to experiment with different support strategies. While it would be unwise to infer that the improvement achieved

Table 6.1: Results of the operation of the 'at risk' procedure 1999-2002

	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02
1 Total no. of students in tutorial groups	80	120	130
2 a) Total no. of students who withdrew	37	58	40
b) % total withdrawn/total in group	46.3	48.3	30.8
3 a) No. of students identified as 'at risk'	28	35	35
b) % 'at risk'/total in group	35	29.1	26.9
4 a) No. of 'at risk' students who withdrew	21	26	15
b) % of 'at risk' students who withdrew/ total number at risk	75	74.3	42.9
c) % of 'at risk' who withdrew/total withdrawn	56.8	44.8	37.5
d) No. of 'at risk' students who reduced their programmes	4	5	6
5 a) No. 'at risk' who completed fully	3	4	17
b) % 'at risk' who completed fully	10.7	11.4	48.6
6 a) No. not 'at risk' who withdrew	16	32	25
b) % not 'at risk' who withdrew/total students who were not 'at risk'	30.7	37.6	26.3
c) No. not 'at risk' who reduced their programmes	0	18	6

during the third year of the scheme was solely due to the ‘at risk’ procedure, additional evidence suggests that the tutors did make a significant contribution. In Table 6.2, which summarises the responses made on ‘Form 6’ of the ‘at risk’ procedure by students who completed, two-fifths of the respondents attributed their completion directed to the quality of teaching and tutorial support. This evidence also suggests that the ‘at risk’ approach has the potential to contribute to an improved understanding of the complexities of the learning process by offering a means of exploring the

Table 6.2: Reasons for completing the course

Reason	%
Quality of teaching/tutorial support	40
Personal motivation	36
Positive atmosphere on course/in college	9
Support from friends in college	7
Support from outside college	7
Other	1

reasons for completing. Therefore, its continued use beyond the period of this investigation, both as a vehicle for professional development and pastoral care, would appear to be justified.

Motivational interviewing

Meanwhile, Table 6.2 also indicates the importance attached to ‘personal motivation’ by those who did complete. Earlier, Chapter 4 described how, with the aim of encouraging leavers to overcome the barriers to completion, the college’s Quality Unit had attempted to promote the use of motivational interviewing (MI) by arranging for an initial group of 20 tutors to participate in a training programme organised by Knowsley College, where the technique had been used successfully with students whose socio-economic characteristics were very similar to those of the case-study college. Although on a cross-college level the response to this initiative was very limited, the Humanities tutor who had received the training did meet with considerable success when he linked the technique to the ‘at risk’ procedure. During the final year of this study, the tutor offered motivational interviews to students whose absence record and failure to submit assignments had suggested that they had a high risk of leaving. Of the 15 students who

received this support, only one withdrew from the college without completing, which suggests that the technique has the potential to make a significant contribution to retention improvement.

Peer support: the buddy system

Meanwhile, a pastoral technique which could help to reduce the risk of withdrawal due to social isolation within the group was identified during a focus group with the Student Services Team, who suggested that a group of existing students could be trained as mentors or ‘buddies’ to support new entrants. As the mentors could receive a qualification on completion of their training both parties could benefit from the process. The advantages which could accrue from formalised or structured peer support were apparent in the evidence from the biographical interviews.

Paul, whose isolation within his course group had prompted his tutors to place him on the ‘at risk’ register, confirmed that he had no friends at college but indicated that it was his own choice. He also revealed that his involvement in college life was minimal: he had not used the computers in the learning centre or visited the college library since the induction visit. Paul had also refused to comply with the wider requirements of his course by failing to join the Curriculum 2000 enrichment programme, avoiding personal tutorials and missing the majority of his General Studies lessons. Moreover, he had only chosen to take an AS/A Level course at the FE college rather than the Sixth Form college because his brothers had both been successful former students and the college had supported one them through their mother’s illness and death from cancer.

Paul had considered dropping out of the course during the first term because the pressure of work was greater than he had encountered at school when he took his GCSEs, but, due to family encouragement, he had stayed, a situation which had been predicted by one of his older brothers who had been a member of one of the earlier completers focus groups and had indicated that Paul was ‘different from the rest of the family’. Nevertheless, he did drop AS Level Biology as he did not like the content. However, the content of another of his subjects forced him to reduce his self-imposed isolation. The coursework assignment in Media Studies required him to

participate in group work and, to his surprise, he found that he enjoyed it because 'I entered into conversation a lot more with the other students and it boosted my confidence.'

The potential contribution to retention improvement which could result from a 'buddy' or peer support system were also clearly indicated in the accounts of the friendship which developed between two of the other biographical interviewees, Jenny and Rachel. Jenny had dropped out of her first attempt at the college's two-year GCSE course because she 'didn't know anyone and felt awkward' However, when she re-enrolled for the same course in the following year she developed friendships within her course group and remarked that the difference between school and college is that 'people like me now, I've got mates and I don't get bullied.' Although in one interview Jenny indicated that she might have stayed on the course at the second attempt because her father and others had called her a drop-out in the past and she 'wanted to prove them wrong', her frequent reference to the importance of friendship suggested that a sense of acceptance was a significant influence in encouraging her to achieve a successful educational outcome for the first time.

The emphasis which Jenny placed on the value of friendship was further illustrated when she indicated that she was particularly pleased that her closest friend on the course, Rachel, had asked their course tutor for reassurance that they would be in the same group when they enrolled for their new programme in the following academic year. The impact on retention of the mutually reinforcing benefit of friendship was also evident in the account provided by Rachel, who was 'at risk' because she had arrived at college with a history of poor attendance at secondary school, and, as Chapter 4 showed, had avoided withdrawal during the first term largely due to the fortuitous support she received from a number of youth workers who had befriended her while she had been at school and had encouraged her involvement in voluntary work. She indicated that she found theory boring and didn't like 'sitting behind desks' but preferred 'to do practical things and seriously thought about giving up.'

However, Rachel valued the supportive friendships she had made at college and indicated that they compensated for the less attractive features of the college experience: 'some days the course is boring but I don't mind because I really like the group.' She also acknowledged that she preferred the adult atmosphere of the college to the more formal culture she had encountered at school: 'the teachers are better—they treat you as the age you are and give you more respect in return.' Once she had made the decision to stay after the first term Rachel found to her surprise that her attendance improved and she even began to enjoy a sense of achievement from 'getting the work done.'

Meanwhile, the buddy system might also help to reduce the potentially destructive effects of the intimidating tensions which can result from the conflict between opposing cliques encountered by Anne or the unusual form of psychological bullying faced by Sandra on their Access programmes. While Anne was fortunate in that by chance she 'bonded' with another student who was similarly isolated and Sandra was encouraged by a friend who had no connection with the college, other students might have withdrawn and the structured support offered by a well organised buddy system might counter this risk. As Tinto's (1975, 1993, 1997) model suggests, a lack of social integration, or 'normative congruence', stemming from a sense of isolation can create an important barrier to completion.

However, in practice, the organisation of buddy groups is potentially problematic because the majority of students in the case-study cohort were enrolled on one-year courses. Therefore, such groups would have to be formed from students who had all only recently arrived at the college and whose disposition to learning was largely unknown to staff. This can have potentially damaging consequences as the staff focus group explained:

'Students who enrol with a group of school friends often leave together and while they are still on the course they reinforce each other's bad habits such as lateness, absenteeism and missing assignment deadlines.'

This observation draws interesting parallels with the findings of the classic studies on the impact of counter-school sub-cultures by researchers such as Hargreaves (1967) and Willis (1977). However, the literature on the causes

of withdrawal currently does not appear to address this issue. Nevertheless, the benefits of establishing effective study support groups of peers within the first three weeks of the programme have been reported by colleges such as Lambeth (Martinez 1997), where tutors establish mutually supportive networks of students via exercises within an extended induction period which allow student dispositions to surface. The adoption of a similar model, within the tutorial programme of the case-study college, might assist in selection of appropriate pairings of 'buddies'.

On-programme support: teaching, assessment and curriculum design

Earlier, it was shown in Table 6.2 that more than one third of the completers who had considered leaving had identified 'personal motivation' as the main influence on their decision to stay. Although motivation has often been regarded as a stable personality trait which students brought with them, research by Entwistle (1998) has suggested that it is a factor which can be influenced by teaching and assessment. Therefore, while the majority of students who left the case-study college did so for reasons which appeared to be beyond the control of the college, there is a need to examine the ways in which teaching and assessment strategies can help to retain students by supporting their 'personal motivation'. Furthermore, refinement of pedagogic techniques and assessment regimes may also assist the 24% of students who left for 'personal reasons' (Table 4.2) to overcome the constraints situated in their 'familial habitus' by improving the efficiency of the 'institutional habitus' in helping them to complete. As Reay et al (2001b) and Thomas (2002) have shown, such refinement of the 'institutional habitus' could play a significant role in helping to widen participation by retaining students from the type of 'non-traditional' educational backgrounds shown in Tables 4.6 and 4.7 of the survey population of the case-study cohort.

Peer observation

A starting point for improvement of the pedagogic aspects of the 'institutional habitus' is to address the variations in withdrawal rates between subjects which were shown in Table 4.4. To explore ways in which tutors could reduce these variations, while simultaneously aiming to raise retention rates in all subjects, a system of peer observation was devised

during the early stages of this research project to identify and share examples of successful classroom practice. In common with the other features of this study, such as the 'at risk' procedure, the system was designed in consultation with the tutors. The aim was not only to encourage a sense of ownership of the process, but also to release a professional resource that previously had been largely untapped by the existing graded observations conducted by managers, which provided only limited feedback and did not have a mechanism to share 'best practice' with other tutors. The peer system involved pairs of tutors conducting observations on a mutually agreed sample of each other's lessons during a six-month period while undertaking a continuous dialogue about their experience of the process. In contrast to the college's existing system of lesson observations, which were modelled on the inspection process and whose chief purpose was the production of a grade profile, the peer system was deliberately designed to be ungraded in order to encourage a culture of openness, co-operation and collegiality.

It is too early to reach a conclusive evaluation of the effectiveness of this measure because the approach is still at a developmental stage and it was not possible within the scope of this study to identify an 'effect size' (Fitz-Gibbon 1996) by comparing the results with an independent control group. To reach an objective judgement about the effectiveness of the approach would require further research over a longer period. Nevertheless, the evidence from the tutors' focus groups suggests that after some initial reservations about their classrooms 'invaded' by another colleague, most tutors found that, by encouraging self-critical reflective practice (Schon 1983), peer observation has offered powerful insights into the students' experience of learning. For the majority of tutors it was the first time they had observed a lesson since completing their own teacher training courses. They found that the opportunity to witness the lesson through the eyes of a student prompted reflection on their own delivery styles as well as that of the tutor being observed. Indeed, the general consensus was that the observer had gained at least as much from the process as the observed tutor. There was unanimous agreement in the staff focus group when a tutor commented:

‘When it started I was very reluctant to get involved. I found the idea quite threatening and thought it would be just as bad as the college inspections which seemed to be designed to catch you out. However, once I tried it I was amazed at how much I learnt from watching someone else teach. I picked up quite a few ideas I could use in my own classroom and I cringed a few times when I thought of some of the things I have been inflicting on students for years. I never thought I would say it but I would recommend it to other people.’

This approach is also consistent with the analysis of Somekh et al (1999), which was reviewed in Chapter 2, in that there is a need to move from the control orientation of the new managerialism, characterised by the ‘effectiveness’ paradigm, towards the improvement paradigm because the latter seeks to harness the professional knowledge and ‘craft’ (Cooper and McIntyre 1996) of tutors in the pursuit of retention improvement. However, as Simkins (2000) has shown, the rise of new managerialism has caused considerable tensions in professionally-staffed organisations such as colleges. In addition to reducing the status and autonomy of professionals, the demand for overt accountability to externally-set targets has exposed fundamental differences in the values held about the educational purpose of colleges and the definition of ‘meeting students’ needs’. Professionalism has tended to be associated with a respect for expertise rather than hierarchical position, and, as the literature has indicated (Gleeson and Shain 1999, Hellawell and Hancock 2003), the attempt to impose a new managerialist agenda has tended to result in ‘strategic compliance’ rather than a genuine commitment to corporate goals.

The existence of these tensions between managerialism and professionalism in the FE and HE sectors suggest that a number of implementation issues would need to be considered if the peer observation system were to be extended to other parts of the case-study college. Although the introduction of the system in the Humanities area had been informed by a management of change strategy recommended by Fullan (2001), in which the tutors had participated in the design of the system, it was not fully accepted and

operational until a climate of trust had been established even among staff who worked in the case-study team. This suggests that the wider application of the system would be heavily dependent on a staff development programme which was sensitive to the concerns of the participants.

Taster courses

Meanwhile, other pedagogic strategies which could contribute to an improvement in the 'institutional habitus' by reducing variations in rates of withdrawal were identified during the data collection. Earlier in this Chapter reference was made to the evidence from the completers focus groups which suggested that the provision of more detailed information at enrolment might reduce the number of transfers to other subjects or programmes and the withdrawals during induction or later due to the course being 'too hard'. The completers focus groups then went on to recommend that this measure could be complemented by the introduction of taster courses during induction, particularly in the unfamiliar subjects which tended to indicate higher than average withdrawal rates in Table 4.4:

'It would have been useful to have an idea of what the course was about as we didn't take that subject at school, but would need to give you a feel for the whole syllabus and not just the best bits.' (Completers focus group 2)

The recognition of the danger of being enticed into an unwise choice of subject by receiving a taster course designed to cover only the more popular aspects of the syllabus reveals a remarkably perceptive and realistic insight into curriculum organisation and management, which might have been the product of an experience gained by withdrawal from a previous course.

Modularisation

Another structural change to the organisation of the curriculum and its assessment which could help both retention improvement and the return of students whose learning had been interrupted by illness or family/personal problems for more than the four weeks allowed by the funding body, after which they are deemed by the official definition to have withdrawn, is modularisation. The arrangement of the curriculum into smaller, more manageable units would permit more frequent accreditation and could promote a sense of achievement at an earlier stage of the programme, which

might provide students with an incentive to continue until they had completed the full qualification. It would also provide a re-entry point for students who had withdrawn previously or had been forced by personal circumstances to interrupt their learning. Currently, the absence of accreditation on most programmes for the elements of the course that such students have completed means that they are required to repeat the whole syllabus, which can act therefore as a disincentive to return.

However, the introduction of a modularised curriculum is heavily dependent on developments at national level. While some progress has been made with the unitisation of AS and A Levels into elements which correspond approximately to 8 week modules, as part of the changes introduced by the 'Curriculum 2000' initiative, other programmes such as GCSE still rely largely on end-of-course accreditation. In some cases the barriers to modularisation stem from the funding arrangements rather than the accrediting body. It is ironic that Access to HE courses, which were designed to be a flexible alternative to traditional qualifications such as A Level, currently offer fewer opportunities for modular accreditation due to restrictions imposed by a funding model that rewards the completion of a full certificate at a disproportionately higher rate than the individual units within the programme (Bromley 2002). During a period when policy makers have imposed annual cost savings, or 'efficiency gains', on the FE sector, colleges have faced an operational need to maximise income in order to remain financially solvent. The effect has been to encourage Access students to complete all of the modules on their programmes on a full-time basis within one year rather than by taking individual units as a part-time route over a longer period, which those with significant family responsibilities or who are anxious about returning to education would often prefer (McGivney 2001). Thus, a mechanism created by the funding body to act as an incentive to colleges to increase outputs by improving achievement rates, in response to government pressure to meet its national training and education targets (NTETs), can impede curriculum initiatives which are designed to retain students.

Nevertheless, there are some aspects of curriculum design and assessment which could promote retention improvement and are within the control of

colleges. Several examples emerged from the interviews and focus groups. Anne, one of the biographical interviewees from the Access programme, whose severe lack of confidence in her own ability following an absence of over 20 years from education was one of the main reasons for her inclusion on the 'at risk' register, identified the need for more targeted support to help diffident students such as herself to complete their first assignments. She observed that 'study support is available but it is often too general.' More focussed support would give students such as Anne the sense of achievement that would encourage them to continue, and might help to overcome the high proportion of withdrawals which occur during the first two months of the programme (Table 4.3). Fortunately, due her husband's support and her desire to set a positive example to her children, Anne stayed on the Access course and on completion had gained sufficient confidence to undertake further training as a basic skills tutor with a view to entering a career in teaching. She attributed her newly found confidence to the sense of achievement she had experienced from completing assignments successfully and commented that she was 'proud of myself because at the start of the year I was convinced that I would pack it in.'

As the literature has shown (Martinez 1996; 1997) and, as Anne's case illustrates, there is a need to monitor, with the aid of a more accessible college MIS system, the extent to which peaks in drop-out coincide with assignment deadlines. Where this situation occurs, and especially in the early stages of the programme, the use of smaller, more manageable formative assignments could be incorporated into assessment strategies to act as mechanism for the provision of the more focussed support sought by students such as Anne. To avoid undermining the beneficial effects of this measure, subject tutors would also need to agree an overall timetable of assignment deadlines for the programme to spread the workload more evenly and to prevent the clashes which, as evidence from the completers focus groups indicated in Chapter 4, had placed particular pressure on students who were unable to plan their work to cope with simultaneous submission dates.

Meanwhile, to compensate for the limited opportunities for modularisation which are currently available, the Student Services focus group suggested

that 'catch up workshops' could be offered to students who were reluctant to return after an absence because they had fallen behind in their coursework. They also suggested that similar 'return to learn workshops' would help students who wished to rejoin a course in a subsequent academic year after experiencing a more extended period of interrupted learning. The fact that illness was the third highest reason for leaving (Table 4.2), together with the evidence that high proportion of students had withdrawn from previous courses (Table 4.22), suggests that this measure could benefit a considerable number of individuals.

The college culture

The final pedagogic issue which emerged in Chapter 4 in response to research question 2 was the nature of the college culture and its influence on withdrawal. A number of students questioned whether the college should adopt a teaching culture which is, in the terms used by Hargreaves (1997), less 'welfarist' and nearer to the type 'A' culture found in schools, where there is an emphasis on formal structures and social control. This evidence points to the paradox confronting general FE institutions such as the case-study college, which is that, while many students are attracted to such institutions precisely because they have a more adult and relaxed atmosphere, the same individuals may experience difficulty in coping with the greater freedom offered by an FE college as they have not developed sufficient self discipline to prosper in the 'welfarist' culture. As such students would be unlikely to enrol at an FE college if it did attempt to adopt the type 'A' culture found in some schools, such a move would be self defeating.

It would also be impractical for a number of other reasons. Some students such as Joanne, Jenny and Michelle, who had been bullied at school, needed an alternative to the formal, control-based culture in which the bullying had occurred. Similarly, many mature students who had a negative experience at school would be unlikely to welcome a return to that culture. With the exception of Access programmes, in practice it is difficult to segregate mature students from younger students on most FE courses because funding restrictions impose minimum group sizes, which prevent the separation of students into smaller, age-specific groups. It is also undesirable for other

reasons. As Mike observed, mixed age groups can foster the development of a more mature attitude among younger students:

‘You’ve got to act grown up in college because there are older people in the group and some of them are paying.’

Therefore, the managerial solution to this cultural paradox would appear to be the adoption of measures outlined in this Chapter, which should provide greater support while preserving the underlying culture of FE colleges.

The implications at senior management level

Having considered potential improvements which could be made at the course team and cross-college functional services level, it is now appropriate to turn to the implications for senior management in the case-study college. However, before examining the issues it is necessary to consider the role of the researcher.

As an ‘insider’ there is a need to be reflexive about the impact of the researcher’s role in the selection and analysis of the data (Bryman 2001). While the researcher’s role has already been considered in general terms in Chapter 5, it is particularly relevant when examining the implications of the findings for senior management because, having been a middle manager when the study began, the researcher saw his role change radically when he was made redundant during the final year of data collection. In such circumstances the researcher was clearly aware of the danger that his judgement about the data could have been influenced by his reaction to the change in his employment status. Therefore, as a precautionary measure, two middle managers who were known to be generally sympathetic to the managerial approach adopted by the Senior Management Team (SMT) were invited to monitor the findings presented in this section for evidence of bias. As no objections were raised to the content of this section, it is assumed that the researcher’s reflexivity about his role had served to counter the risk that his personal circumstances had influenced his judgement about the data.

The analysis of the evidence gathered in response to Research Question 2 indicated that a number of potentially effective improvement measures had

been initiated at senior management level. These included the introduction of Tutorial Support Assistants (TSAs) to monitor attendance and retention, and the training of 20 staff in the Motivational Interviewing (MI) techniques.

However, evidence from the staff focus groups indicated that the implementation by senior management of a number of these initiatives had been less successful. For example, the failure to define the role of the TSAs and to train them, together with the allocation of conflicting tasks and their relocation and subsequent redundancy suggests a need for improved co-ordination, less 'ambiguity' (Cohen and March 1989) and greater consistency in decision making at senior management level. Similarly, the limited application of the MI technique to only 50 interviews over a 12 month period not only represents inefficient use of staff time and training resources but also suggests the need for more visible commitment to the process from the SMT. As the Student Services observed:

'Everyone assumes that something will happen but nobody is taking the initiative.'

The conflicting priorities were also evident in the suspension of the central system of initial guidance and counselling in 2000 following fears that it might delay the processing of applications and prompt applicants to seek courses at other colleges. It is significant that this change was followed by a doubling in the proportion of students who transferred to other courses in the survey population. The greater priority afforded to marketing and the achievement of enrolment funding targets than to the effective guidance of students was similarly apparent in the SMT's support for the resistance shown by the Marketing Department to the proposal for more detailed leaflets on the grounds that additional information about the demanding nature of some programmes might deter applicants.

In addition, the turbulence within the organisation, which was described in Chapter 1 and resulted in a total of eight re-organisations of the college structure within a seven year period, appears to have compounded the ambiguity and confusion. As Greenfield (1989) has observed from a

phenomenological perspective, there is a tendency to respond to problems by changing the structure, or

‘shifting the external trappings of organization...(rather than) altering the deeper meanings and purposes which people express.....Thus it appears that we cannot solve organizational problems by either abolishing or improving structure alone; we must also look at their human foundations.’ (p.90-91)

The most recent example of this trend occurred in an area of the organisation which is responsible for one of its key functions. The appointment of three successive Heads of Information Services within a twelve month period resulted in an absence of reliable and accessible enrolment and attendance data. This prevented the introduction of retention improvement measures such as taster courses because the MIS system was already unable to provide tutors with data about students on the single enrolment cycle which currently exists; the introduction of taster courses would exacerbate the problem by requiring a double enrolment cycle. For the same reason the analysis by course teams of attendance and withdrawal patterns was hampered by the need to assemble the data manually from registers dispersed across multiple sites. Similarly, by creating the problem of incompatible data, the frequent changes to the format of the Student Perception of Course (SPOC) quality questionnaires also restricted the ability of course teams to analyse the impact of their retention improvement strategies on levels of student satisfaction.

Meanwhile the focus on structural change and ‘the external trappings’ rather than process has resulted in the isolation of individuals such as the member of the Quality Unit who, as Chapter 4 showed, is responsible for the promotion of retention improvement measures but does not have access to any of the decision-making committees. Similarly, the absence of a cross-college forum to share information about the development of strategies such as the ‘at risk’ process and peer observation prevented potentially beneficial processes from being applied, and refined through testing, in other areas of the college. Thus, the use of the ‘at risk’ procedure remains ‘loosely

coupled' (Weick 1989) to the rest of the organisation despite its dissemination and publication beyond the college (Palmer 2001b).

In defence of the SMT, it must be acknowledged that the external management pressure exerted by the funding body, to ensure that the college achieved its enrolment and income targets, was a very significant influence on the decision making of the newly appointed managerial team. This external influence on a college, which was just emerging from the major financial crisis described in Chapter 1, may explain the SMT's decision to support marketing initiatives in preference to ensuring the quality and continuity of the initial guidance and counselling provided to students. Here, the relevance of the observation made by Hoy and Miskel (1989), which was quoted in the description of the college context in Chapter 1, is apparent:

'The price of survival is compliance...' (p.33)

Similarly, the urgent requirement to overturn the very poor inspection grades for management and governance may explain the perceived need to be seen to be exercising leadership by restructuring the college, although such a course of action appears only to have added to the high level of turbulence and ambiguity which had followed the very frequent re-organisations which had occurred in recent years. However, as review of the literature in Chapter 2 indicated, such actions can widen the implementation gap between the intentions of the policy makers and the outcomes in the institution because by failing to 'connect with an understanding of the realities of teachers this increasing clarity at the top will only increase incoherence at the bottom.' (Hopkins et al. 1997, p.7)

A leadership model which could overcome these problems already exists. Knowsley College, an FE institution which is situated in an equally deprived catchment area to that of the case-study college, addressed the problem of a an overall drop-out rate of 25% by making retention improvement the priority for the organisation (Martinez 1996). The Principal emphasised the commitment of senior management to the task by outlining his strategy to a meeting of the whole college at the start of an

academic year. He then invited staff to work on the development of improvement strategies by forming 60 retention action teams and appointed two project managers to co-ordinate their work. A further 13 course administrators were appointed to contact absent students immediately to encourage them to return to college. The cost of appointing these staff was borne by increasing the teaching load of each tutor by one hour per week in return for a reduction in the administrative burden of sending letters to students, a task which was now performed by the new course administrators. Meanwhile, to demonstrate the continuing commitment of senior management to the project the assistant principals joined the retention action teams.

The success of this unambiguous, co-ordinated and stable management strategy was indicated by 7.5% improvement in retention over two years and an increase of £200,000 in FEFC income per year from the additional students who were retained. It also resulted in the award of 'Beacon' status to the college by the FEFC in recognition of this example of successful practice, and the development of the MI process which addresses the problem of the negative impact of external factors on student motivation. As Martinez (1997) has concluded in his analysis of successful retention strategies:

'In the main, colleges and services which have achieved the most significant improvements have linked a 'bottom-up' with a 'top-down' approach. Features of the latter include public commitment from senior managers and college governors, prioritising student retention within the organisation's strategic objectives and plans, and using managerial attention, time and energy.' (p.132)

The adoption of this leadership model at the case-study college could offer a number of benefits. The direct involvement of senior management demonstrates a commitment to an unambiguous objective, but the achievement of that objective, through the establishment of action teams, provides a high degree of autonomy, which offers an opportunity for the professional reconstruction described by Shain and Gleeson (1999). In contrast to the control-oriented approach of new managerialism, this model

aims to foster a sense of collegiality, emphasises process rather than structure, and releases a previously underused organisational resource by drawing on the skills of staff while allowing them to retain ownership of the process. By adopting this 'bottom up' approach in which teams are given responsibility for the development of their own solutions, it could reduce the resistance to change which is often associated with micro-political rivalry between groups, such as that between the Science and Humanities Sections at the case-study college. In doing so, the process resembles the examples of change implementation described by Hopkins et al. (1994) in their account of the school improvement approach. Finally, the Knowsley College model also recognises that, as Bennett and Anderson (2003) have argued, leadership can be performed at various levels of an organisation and rests as much upon individual expertise as it does on formal position or status.

CHAPTER 7: THE POLICY IMPLICATIONS AT NATIONAL LEVEL

This concluding chapter examines the messages which can be drawn from the findings of the investigation which need to be considered by those who operate beyond the institution at policy level. The chapter raises a number of concerns about the validity of current policy assumptions and the ideological nature of the research which supports the official view of withdrawal. The legitimacy of continuing to use withdrawal data for the measurement of college and student performance is also examined.

The challenge to the dominant policy assumption

The evidence from this case-study has indicated that, when using the single-cause reasons for leaving currently employed by the funding body, external influences on student withdrawal exceed college-based factors by a ratio of 4:1 (Table 4.2). However, a more important outcome of the study is that it demonstrates that there is a fundamental flaw in the attempt to reduce the explanation of withdrawal to a single cause, because the reasons for leaving or completing courses can rest on a complex and varied combination of influences which are often closely linked to conditions in the local context.

Although this investigation was based on one college, its findings are consistent with those in the majority of studies in the growing body of literature on this topic. Therefore, as the analysis of the first research question showed in Chapter 2, the assumption which appears to have shaped policy decisions about the funding, measurement and inspection of FE institutions, that student withdrawal is primarily caused by deficiencies in the quality of teaching and support in colleges, is, if its dominant influence continues, unlikely to promote significant improvements in retention. The evidence suggests that this assumption represents a generalisation which is no longer tenable.

It was also shown that the continued adherence to this assumption, despite the growing body of research evidence which challenges it, owed much to the well-timed publication of the study by Martinez (1995) and Davies

(1997). Their work was positioned within the ideological framework of the school effectiveness paradigm and they have since acknowledged their debt to its role in providing them with access to receptive policy makers (Davies and Martinez 2001). Meanwhile, the imposition of 'performativity' (Ball 1999) via new managerialism, financial penalties and 'naming and shaming' by the Inspectorate suggests that this paradigm has continued to exert a powerful influence on policy. Yet its influence has failed to inspire the outcomes required by policy makers: it has been acknowledged recently that retention rates 'have barely improved over the last 4 years' (Maynard and Martinez 2002).

It is notable that two prominent members of the school effectiveness paradigm observed that, after many years of research, 'we have learned that school education cannot compensate for society and that in making high demands of teachers and raising our expectations of schools we must have scrupulous respect for the evidence on socio-economic inequality and the changing nature of family and community life' (Macbeath and Mortimore 2001, p.2). The presence of such factors was clearly evident in the FE context of this college case-study. In Chapter 4 the quantitative evidence gathered via the induction survey in response to research question 3 indicated that, while there were some differences between the socio-economic characteristics of leavers and completers, a high proportion of both groups did not have access to the type of cultural and social capital which more privileged members of society are able to use to help them to complete their qualifications. Meanwhile, the evidence from the biographical interviews demonstrated that college staff had made an important contribution to the retention of students whose personal circumstances and life histories suggested that they had a high risk of withdrawal. In helping the majority of students to complete despite the complications and socio-economic disadvantages in their lives, the staff had inspired a 'value added' outcome which may have extended well beyond the measurement of examination performance.

College improvement

The evidence has shown that there is a need to seek insights from perspectives other than the effectiveness paradigm if a reduction in drop-out

is to be achieved. Somekh et al. (1999) have argued that the solution is to incorporate more of the elements of the improvement paradigm into the policy process by drawing to a greater extent on the professional skills of staff. Specific examples of how this might occur within colleges were identified earlier in Chapter 6. By using focus groups to draw on the experience of both students and staff, a managerial strategy was developed to address the college-based influences on withdrawal which had been identified in response to research question 2, while supporting individuals in attempting to overcome the barriers outside the college identified in research question 3. These included improvements in the initial guidance and counselling offered to students, the introduction of a peer observation process to encourage tutors to support each other in the improvement of pedagogic practice, and measures to counter the effects of the organisational ambiguity which had surrounded the operation of college-wide processes. Meanwhile, some of the other recommendations, such as the reform of the funding model to provide tutors with greater flexibility in curriculum design and accreditation via increased opportunities for modularisation, together with the extension of financial support for students by broadening the criteria for eligibility in the EMA scheme, would require action at national level before they could be implemented.

An alternative perspective

However, a more radical view has been offered by a commentator who has extensive experience of research into student withdrawal in FE. Research by Kenwright (2000) has raised 'serious doubts about the assumption that drop-out is a reliable indicator of failure' (p.16) in either students or colleges. In her study most of the leavers 'were content with their decision to drop-out, and did not feel it had adversely affected their lives,' and she suggests that 'learning may not be the best option for any one individual at a specific time' (Kenwright 2002, p.11). Instead, 'learning is most successful when it happens at the right time for the learner, when motivation, opportunity and resources combine' (ibid, p.12). She proposes the use of the concept of the 'transitional learner', who for reasons other than the quality or suitability of provision, decides not to complete at that time. Such learners could then be distinguished from the 'let-down learner', whose progress had been undermined by the poor quality of the provision. Thus, she is questioning

not only the definition and measurement of drop-out but is also raising the more fundamental issue of whether withdrawal should be defined as a problem in all cases. Indeed, for Kenwright (2002) the problem is 'to address the difficulties for learners of dropping back in, rather than the quest for the ultimate route to 100% retention (p.11).

This argument builds on the work of Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997, 1999, 2000b, Hodkinson and Bloomer 2001, Hodkinson 2002), whose analysis of a cohort of young people, as they made the transition from school to FE, was reviewed in Chapter 2. For some of the students in their study, the decision to withdraw and pursue other interests was the most sensible course of action, but in the restrictive, audit-driven culture of contemporary FE this was viewed as failure. However, as Bloomer and Hodkinson showed, this view represents a failure to understand the nature of learning and of learning careers. In some cases the act of leaving can in itself be a positive learning experience. However, those who drop-out often find themselves denied sources of help. For these individuals

'it was as if, by making a choice that was not officially sanctioned, they placed themselves beyond the guidance pale. They could be helped to stay on, but not to leave.'

(Hodkinson and Bloomer 2001, p.138)

Thus, the narrow focus on increasing retention rates at any cost in order to meet performance targets is a policy that can work against the interests of those it is supposedly designed to serve.

This example is an illustration of an important but unpopular message from research, which challenges current policy. Much of the evidence in this investigation carries a similar message. The real test of whether the Department for Education and Science's current drive for 'evidence-informed' policy making (Sebba 1999) has had an impact in the area of retention will be the extent to which colleges continue to be held solely responsible for student withdrawal. If the practice of penalising colleges with higher than average rates of student withdrawal continues indiscriminately, it will suggest that the messages provided by recent research on the topic have been avoided or rejected by policy makers. The continuation of the current policy could also have implications for other

priorities such as social inclusion, because it could lead colleges to adopt a more defensive and conservative approach to the achievement of retention targets by restricting the entry of students who have a high risk of withdrawal, resulting in the narrowing rather than the widening of participation.

Conclusion

This study began the analysis of student withdrawal in the case-study college by working within the terms of the debate established by the research (Martinez 1995, Davies 1997) which appears to have played a significant role in shaping and reinforcing dominant policy assumptions about the issue. However, in addition to identifying serious flaws in the validity of their findings and the legitimacy of generalisations drawn from such a small sample of colleges and students, the findings of this study also point to the limitations of attempting to confine the explanation of a process as complex as withdrawal to a simplistic, and ultimately unhelpful, dichotomy between college-based and external causes. The experiences of the students who contributed to this study clearly illustrate the inter-dependent nature of the wide range of factors, both within and beyond the college, which can influence whether a student leaves or completes a programme and also the difficulty of attempting to reduce that decision to a cause and effect relationship.

While Chapter 6 has offered a number of tentative recommendations for the management of a retention improvement strategy, which by drawing on insights from the improvement paradigm aim to benefit from the 'reconstituted professionalism' (Shain and Gleeson 1999) of staff in the college, this case study also demonstrates the need to consider more fundamental questions such as the nature of learning. As Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000b) have noted, if educational failure and the social exclusion associated with it are to be reduced 'a prerequisite must be an appropriate understanding of the nature of learning and of learning careers, and the wider lives of the young people we are trying to help' (p.74). Ultimately, this leads to the need to question the definition of failure and whether policy makers should continue to view it as being synonymous with 'drop-out', when, for some students, withdrawal can be a learning

experience. It is perhaps ironic that, in an age when consumer choice has been so heavily promoted by policy makers, withdrawal is not an option.

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Appendix 1

Induction survey

STUDENT SURVEY

INTRODUCTION

The College is conducting some research in order to understand the reasons why some Students make progress but others have to leave courses early without gaining qualifications. When students drop out before completing their qualifications the College is unable to help them progress to new opportunities. This research should help to ensure that more students benefit fully from College courses.

As some of the questions ask about personal details, all of the information collected will be treated in the strictest confidence. It will not be possible to identify an individual from the summarised results of the survey and no outside agency will ever have access to your personal details. Nevertheless, you are not required to complete this survey if you do not wish to.

PERSONAL DETAILS

1 Full Name _____

2 Postcode _____

C1

COURSE DETAILS

3 Title of your course at this college (e.g full-time A level) _____

D2

Please list the subjects you are taking this year

Level

Subject

4 Total number of hours per week in class _____



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TEXT BOUND CLOSE TO
THE SPINE IN THE
ORIGINAL THESIS

REASONS FOR CHOOSING THIS COURSE

5 How did you find out about the course? Please tick the main source of information from the list.

- | | | | |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------|---|--|
| Friends or family | <input type="checkbox"/> ¹ | College Literature | <input type="checkbox"/> ⁹ |
| School Teacher | <input type="checkbox"/> ² | College Open Day | <input type="checkbox"/> ¹⁰ |
| Careers Teacher | <input type="checkbox"/> ³ | Personal visit to College
on another occasion. | <input type="checkbox"/> ¹¹ |
| Careers Officer | <input type="checkbox"/> ⁴ | Staff on another course
at Halton College | <input type="checkbox"/> ¹² |
| Careers Evening | <input type="checkbox"/> ⁵ | Other (<i>please specify</i>) | <input type="checkbox"/> ¹³ |
| Employer | <input type="checkbox"/> ⁶ | | |
| Newspaper Advert | <input type="checkbox"/> ⁷ | | |
| Other Advert | <input type="checkbox"/> ⁸ | | |

E3

6 Which of the following **best** describes your reason for taking your current course?

- to progress to further qualifications ☐ ¹
- to gain a job at the end of this course ☐ ²
- to pursue a personal interest ☐ ³
- to keep my parents / guardian happy ☐ ⁴

Other (*please specify*) _____

5

F4

7 Is the course you are now starting your first choice?

Yes ☐ ¹ No ☐ ²

G5

8 If no, please specify the course you would have preferred.

9 What is the name of the last secondary school you attended?

H6

10 Why did you decide to attend this College? Please tick one reason only.

- | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Good College reputation | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 | Wanted to attend course with friends | <input type="checkbox"/> 6 |
| Good course reputation | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 | Little chance of finding a job | <input type="checkbox"/> 7 |
| Well qualified, experienced teachers | <input type="checkbox"/> 3 | Careers advice/Guidance | <input type="checkbox"/> 8 |
| Recommendation of family and friends | <input type="checkbox"/> 4 | Recommendation of School Teachers | <input type="checkbox"/> 9 |
| Near to home | <input type="checkbox"/> 5 | | |
| Other (please specify) | | | <input type="checkbox"/> 10 |

I7

11 When you were at secondary school what sort of impression did you gain about the College?

- | | |
|--|----------------------------|
| a. Positive impression (e.g the College offers good courses) | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 |
| b. Negative impression (e.g the College is for people who fail at school). | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 |
| c. No impression (e.g the College was not mentioned) | <input type="checkbox"/> 3 |

J8

12 Did your teachers support your decision to come to College?

- | | | | | | |
|-----|----------------------------|----|----------------------------|---|--------------------------|
| Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 | No | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 | Not applicable because I left school a long time ago. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|-----|----------------------------|----|----------------------------|---|--------------------------|

K9

13 To what extent did your family support your decision to come to this College?

- | | |
|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| Very strong support | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 |
| Some support | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 |
| Didn't mind | <input type="checkbox"/> 3 |
| Not interested | <input type="checkbox"/> 4 |
| Did not want me to come | <input type="checkbox"/> 5 |

L10

14 Did any of your friends influence you to come to College?

Yes ☐ ¹ No ☐ ²

M11

15 Did any of your friends come to this College at the same time as you?

Yes ☐ ¹ No ☐ ²

N12

16 Please tick the month you first applied for your course at this College.

Nov-01	<input type="checkbox"/>	¹	Feb-02	<input type="checkbox"/>	⁴	May-02	<input type="checkbox"/>	⁷	Aug-02	<input type="checkbox"/>	¹⁰
Dec-01	<input type="checkbox"/>	²	Mar-02	<input type="checkbox"/>	⁵	Jun-02	<input type="checkbox"/>	⁸	Sep-02	<input type="checkbox"/>	¹¹
Jan-02	<input type="checkbox"/>	³	Apr-02	<input type="checkbox"/>	⁶	Jul-02	<input type="checkbox"/>	⁹	Oct-02	<input type="checkbox"/>	¹²

O13

17 Was your experience of school life:

Most enjoyable ☐ ¹ No strong feelings about it ☐ ²
Mainly unpleasant ☐ ³

18 If it was mainly unpleasant, please explain why _____

X22

19 Please list the qualifications and grades you gained before you started your present course (i.e include grades gained at other schools/colleges)

<u>GCSE</u>	<u>Grade</u>	<u>GCSE</u>	<u>Grade</u>
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____

Office use only

Total number
of GCSE
points

P14

Average
GCSE points
per subject

Q15

Please list any of the above which were taken at this College.

A level	Grade	AS Level	Grade

Total number
of A level
points

R16

Average
A level points
per subject

S17

Please list any of the above which were taken at this College.

OTHER (including overseas qualifications)

Type (e.g BTEC National)	Subject	Grade

T18

PREVIOUS LEARNING EXPERIENCE

20 Have you ever left a previous course without finishing the qualification?

Yes ☐ 1 No ☐ 2

21 What was your main lesson for leaving?

U19

22a How confident are you about using a computer/word processor?

U20

Very ☐ 1 Fairly ☐ 2 Not confident ☐ 3 Terrified ☐ 4

22b Did you use a computer word processor at School?

Yes ☐ 1 No ☐ 2

W21

STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL

PERSONAL AND FAMILY BACKGROUND

23

How old are you?

16-19

☐

1

20-25

☐

2

26-30

☐

3

31-60

☐

4

60+

☐

5

Y23

24

Gender:

Female

☐

1

Male

☐

2

(Please tick)

25

Ethnicity

Please tick the appropriate box. If you are descended from more than one ethnic or racial group, please tick the group to which you consider you belong or tick the other box.

Ethnicity (Please tick appropriate box)

Bangladeshi

☐

1

Chinese

☐

5

Other-Asian

☐

9

Black African

☐

2

Indian

☐

6

Other-(please specify)

☐

10

Black Caribbean

☐

3

Pakistani

☐

7

Black Others

☐

4

White

☐

8

AA25

26

Which of the following best describes your situation (Please tick one box only)

Living with both parents/guardians

☐

1

Living with one parent/guardian

☐

2

Single, living alone

☐

3

Married

☐

4

Separated, living alone

☐

5

Divorced

☐

6

Widowed

☐

7

Parent in a one parent family

☐

8

Living with a partner

☐

9

Living with grandparents

☐

10

Other (please specify)

11

AB26

27 Who is the main breadwinner in your household?

Yourself ☐ ¹
 Father ☐ ²
 Mother ☐ ³
 Husband/male partner ☐ ⁴
 Wife/female partner ☐ ⁵

Other (please describe)..... ⁶
AC27

28 i. On average how much time per day do you devote to looking after someone in your household (e.g your own children, brothers, sisters, sick or elderly relatives etc)

No time ☐ ¹
 1-2 hours ☐ ²
 3-4 hours ☐ ³
 5-6 hours ☐ ⁴
 More than 6 hours ☐ ⁵
AD28

ii Does this reduce the time you would like to spend in College?

Yes ☐ ¹
 No ☐ ²
AE29

29 If you are over 18 and have a partner, please describe his/her most recent job

 AF30

30 Is your partner currently employed? Yes ☐ ¹ No ☐ ²

Not applicable ☐
AG31

31 Which of the following best describes your parents/guardian's situation?

	<i>Father/Male Guardian</i>	<i>Mother/Female Guardian</i>
Single	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
Married	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
Separated	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 3
Divorced	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
Widowed	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
One parent family	<input type="checkbox"/> 6	<input type="checkbox"/> 6
Living with partner	<input type="checkbox"/> 7	<input type="checkbox"/> 7
Deceased	<input type="checkbox"/> 8	<input type="checkbox"/> 8

Other (Please specify) _____
 AH32
AI33

32

Is your father currently :

Employed ☐ ¹ Unemployed ☐ ² Retired ☐ ³ Deceased ☐ ⁴

AJ34

33

What is/was your father's most recent job? _____

(if you do not know the title describe what he does/did)

AK35

34

Is your mother currently:

Employed ☐ ¹ Unemployed ☐ ²
Retired ☐ ³ Deceased ☐ ⁴

AL36

35

What is/was your mother's most recent job? _____

(if you do not know the job title please describe what she does/did)

AM37

36

At what age did your father/male guardian and mother/female guardian leave **full-time** education

Father/Male Guardian

15 ☐ ¹
16 ☐ ²
17 ☐ ³
18 ☐ ⁴
19 ☐ ⁵
20 ☐ ⁶
21 ☐ ⁷
22+ ☐ ⁸

Do not know ☐ ⁹

AN38

Mother/Female Guardian

15 ☐ ¹
16 ☐ ²
17 ☐ ³
18 ☐ ⁴
19 ☐ ⁵
20 ☐ ⁶
21 ☐ ⁷
22+ ☐ ⁸

Do not know ☐ ⁹

AO39

37

If possible, please indicate the highest level of qualification achieved by your parents/guardians.

Father/Male Guardian

None
O'Levels/GCSE/Level 2
A'Levels/Adv Craft/Level 3
Degree/Teaching Cert/
Professional Qualification
Do not know

☐ ¹
☐ ²
☐ ³
☐ ⁴
☐ ⁵

AP40

Mother/Female Guardian

☐ ¹
☐ ²
☐ ³
☐ ⁴
☐ ⁵

AQ41

- 38 How many **other** members of your immediate family (brothers, sisters, husband/ wife/partner, children) have been in full time education beyond the age of 18

AR42

- 39 Do you have the use of a computer at home? Yes ☐ ¹ No ☐ ²

AS43

- 40 How many books did you/do you have at home **which could help your studies?**

I When you were at secondary school

AT44

0 to 5 ☐ ¹ 6 to 10 ☐ ² 11 to 20 ☐ ³ More than 20 ☐ ⁴

- 41 How often did your parents/guardians go to parents evenings when you were at school?

AV46

Most ☐ ¹ Some ☐ ² Very few ☐ ³ None ☐ ⁴

- 42 How often did your parents/guardians ask you about your progress at school?

Most days ☐ ¹ At least once a week ☐ ² At least once per month ☐ ³
Rarely ☐ ⁵ Never ☐ ⁶

AW47

- 43 How often did your parents offer to help you with your schoolwork/homework?

AX48

Most days ☐ ¹ At least once a week ☐ ² At least once per month ☐ ³
Rarely ☐ ⁴ Never ☐ ⁵

HOUSING SITUATION

44 In your present home are you or your parents

own/buying the property (e.g with a mortgage)
 renting from the Council
 renting from a private landlord
 renting from a housing association

<input type="checkbox"/>	1
<input type="checkbox"/>	2
<input type="checkbox"/>	3
<input type="checkbox"/>	4

other (please specify) _____

AY49

45 How long have you lived at your present address?

Less than one month ☐ ¹ 2-6 months ☐ ² 7-12 months ☐ ³
 1-3 years ☐ ⁴ over 3 years ☐ ⁵

AI50

YOUR EMPLOYMENT / BENEFIT SITUATION

Please answer this section as precisely as possible:

**nb THIS INFORMATION IS BEING COLLECTED TO HELP YOU AND
 WILL NOT BE REVEALED TO ANY OUTSIDE AGENCY**

46 Are you in receipt of Unemployment Benefit? Yes ☐ ¹ No ☐ ²

BA51

47 If you answered yes, to Q46, how long were you unemployed before you came to College?

BB52

1-3 months ☐ ¹ 7-12 months ☐ ³ 3-5 years ☐ ⁵
 4-6 months ☐ ² 1-2 years ☐ ⁴ More than 5 years ☐ ⁶

48 Are you in receipt of any other state benefit? Yes ☐ ¹ No ☐ ²

BC53

49 Do you have any paid work? Yes ☐ ¹ No ☐ ²

BD54

50 If you do have paid work, please state total number of hours per week

BE55

51 Do you receive financial help from College for child care?
 Yes ☐ ¹ No ☐ ² Waiting for a decision ☐ ³ BF56

52 Do you receive free dinners at College?
 Yes ☐ ¹ No ☐ ² Waiting for a decision ☐ ³ BG57

53 Do you receive a grant to attend College?
 Yes ☐ ¹ No ☐ ² Waiting for a decision ☐ ³ BH58

YOUR TRAVEL ARRANGEMENTS

54 How do you **usually** travel to College?

Walk ☐ ¹
 Cycle ☐ ²
 Use public transport ☐ ³
 Use own car ☐ ⁴
 Passenger in someone else's car ☐ ⁵

Other (please specify) _____ ⁶

BI59

55 How many cars are owned by members of your immediate family?

None ☐ ¹ One car ☐ ² Two cars ☐ ³

More than two cars ☐ ⁴

BJ60

J **YOUR COMMITMENT TO YOUR NEW COURSE**

56

Placing yourself on a scale of 1-10, how likely is it that you will complete your new course? In answering this question, please take account of any alternative opportunities, such as a full-time job, which might occur during the year. Please tick one box on the scale below.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

BK61

Very unlikely to complete

Highly likely to complete

57

Is there any other information you would like to add about your reasons for studying at this College or any of the other issues raised by this questionnaire?

Appendix 2

‘At risk’ strategy

RETENTION 'AT RISK' MONITORING PROCEDURE

Benefits of using the procedure

Various FEDA case studies have suggested that it is possible to identify early in the course students who are 'at risk' of non- completion. Students in this category, who are accurately identified can be offered additional support and encouragement to help them overcome the barriers to completion.

Definition of 'at risk'

If students exhibit some of the following characteristics they could be deemed to be 'at risk' and subtly targeted for close attention by the tutor:

having joined the course with only the minimum entry requirements (or in exceptional cases, even less);

confusion about choice of course or not gaining first choice;

lack of clarity about, or commitment to, any career goals / preferred progression route;

late enrolment;

early attendance problems/ poor punctuality;

obvious social isolation in the group, possibly linked to a significantly uneven gender or age profile;

an excessive number of hours per week in a part-time job (i.e more than 15);

a history of having dropped out of previous courses;

severe financial difficulties;

recurring health/personal problems;

high level of anxiety about written work (especially mature returners) and/or failure to submit first assignment.

Professional judgement will need to be exercised about the potential impact of these criteria on each student's situation. From tutorial conversations it may be possible to add other criteria such as lack of parental support for, or interest in, the course. (At the other extreme, this reason can also work in reverse where students feel that they were forced by their parents to enrol on a course they did not wish to take).

The Procedure

Form 1

The initial 'at risk' register (Form1) should be completed by the Personal tutor within three weeks of the start of the programme if effective support is to be offered in time. Additional names could be added at any time when a tutor becomes aware of personal difficulties experienced by students during the course.

A completed example has been included in this pack.

Form 2

After initial identification, any 'at risk' support provided by the personal tutor or Tutorial Support Assistant, such as telephone calls to pursue reasons for persistent and unexplained absence, should be logged and dated on 'Form 2' **and** on the student's pastoral record.

At this stage it may be appropriate to use the 'motivational interviewing' technique with some students. A completed example is given to show the type of support which could be logged.

Form 3

Where students still drop out, despite the extra support provided, their reasons should be recorded either by the Personal Tutor or the Tutorial Support Assistant on 'Form 3,' which can be used to determine the actual, and often complex, causes of leaving. Completed examples have been included to illustrate the level of detail required. Form 3 should also be used to record the reasons for leaving for any other students who failed to complete but were not recorded on the 'at risk' register.

Forms 4 and 5

At the end of the academic year the 'at risk' records can be analysed and summarised on 'Forms 4 and 5'. The data for Form 4 may be available on request from CIS. This process may help to inform the development of future retention strategies and the outcomes could be discussed as part of the End of the Year Review.

Form 6

At the end of the course the use of 'Form 6' with all completers may offer useful insights into strategies which have worked with students who had considered dropping out but stayed. Some of this evidence might demonstrate the effectiveness of the support provided by the course team.

Confidentiality

To protect the students from the effects of negative labelling, it is essential that this process remains confidential and that they are not informed that they have been categorised as 'at risk'. As the data sheets should be stored in an appropriate and secure location a course 'at risk' file under the control of the Course Team Leader should be created.

CONFIDENTIAL —To Avoid the effects of negative labelling please do not inform students that they are regarded as being ‘At Risk’

AT RISK REGISTER

TUTOR’S NAME: _____
GROUP: _____
ACADEMIC YEAR: _____

STUDENT’S NAME	AT RISK CATEGORIES

CONFIDENTIAL –To Avoid the effects of negative labelling please do not inform students that they are regarded as being ‘At Risk’

AT RISK REGISTER

TUTOR’S NAME: _____
GROUP: _____
ACADEMIC YEAR: _____

STUDENT’S NAME	AT RISK CATEGORIES
“Claire Smith”	History of dropping out/ poor attendance
“Peter Jones”	Late enrolment / confusion about course preference
“Andrea Brown”	Health problems / very anxious about assignment workload
“Dave West”	Personal and financial problems.
“Louise North”	Joined with minimum entry requirements / works 25 hours per week in part time job.

RECORD OF SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS 'AT RISK' OF LEAVING

TUTOR:

Name of Student	Evidence of need	Support provided	Date

RECORD OF SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS 'AT RISK' OF LEAVING

TUTOR:

Name of Student	Evidence of need	Support Provided	Date
'Clare Smith'	<ul style="list-style-type: none">History of dropping outPoor attendance (classes)Did not attend Key Skills, Enrichment <p>She got glandular fever when at school and when she returned to school she was not allowed to start new courses so she came to college.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Phoned on a regular basis but: either answer phone or engaged (Internet).Used cards and answer phone messages to encourage return when absent.Sent missed handoutsAllowed her an extension when she did not get her draft AS English course work in.	
	<p>Her reasons for absence from her college classes were almost always health, reasons which she linked to her glandular fever (backed on one occasion by her mother when I managed to get hold of her).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">One to one discussion how she could meet deadlines.She brought to me a Revision/ Work T/T as I suggested to help to get through the mocks.	
	<p>She was also upset because her father had had cancer 10 years ago and there were renewed fears for his health.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Because the Board gave us a week's extension on the Coursework Dispatch deadline I left a message on answer phone to tell her to bring her ICT project to college immediately and it would be accepted. She delivered it.She took AS Literature and AS ICT exams.	

NB Please ensure that a summary of the support provided is logged on the student's tutorial record.

STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL

STUDENTS WHO HAVE LEFT WITHOUT COMPLETING THEIR PROGRAMMES

NAME OF STUDENT:		PROGRAMME:	PERSONAL TUTOR:	DATE LEFT PROGRAMME:	OFFICIAL REASON FOR LEAVING:	ON 'AT RISK' LIST? Y / N
<p><i>Reasons for leaving: Please provide a quotation(3-4 sentences) from the student and/or a paragraph summarising the background to the problem. If you suspect it is poor motivation, please defend this judgement with evidence.</i></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>						

STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL

STUDENTS WHO HAVE LEFT WITHOUT COMPLETING THEIR PROGRAMMES

NAME OF STUDENT:	PROGRAMME:	PERSONAL TUTOR:	DATE LEFT PROGRAMME:	OFFICIAL REASON FOR LEAVING:	ON 'AT RISK' LIST? Y / N
	A LEVEL – FIRST YEAR			ILLNESS	YES

Reasons for leaving: Please provide a quotation(3-4 sentences) from the student and/or a paragraph summarising the background to the problem. If you suspect it is poor motivation, please defend this judgement with evidence.

Telephone call – 26 January ‘I’m still not well – have had flu and laryngitis. And there have been other problems – the dog died in January and now my dad’s been hurt at work. He’s got concussion. I think I’ve missed too much. I’ll carry on with A level Maths because a new module is starting. But I’ll get a job now and start the course in September.’ She did not return to A level Maths . Although there are genuine illness problems that she suffers from every winter (asthma) both the catalogue of excuses and not attending Maths (as she had assured the Maths teacher she would), suggest poor motivation.

STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL

STUDENTS WHO HAVE LEFT WITHOUT COMPLETING THEIR PROGRAMMES

NAME OF STUDENT:	PROGRAMME:	PERSONAL TUTOR:	DATE LEFT PROGRAMME:	OFFICIAL REASON FOR LEAVING:	ON 'AT RISK' LIST? Y / N
	A level one year			Father's illness	Yes

Reasons for leaving: Please provide a quotation(3-4 sentences) from the student and/or a paragraph summarising the background to the problem. If you suspect it is poor motivation, please defend this judgement with evidence.

XXX twice started and dropped out of GCSE classes in 1997 and 1998. This year with her husband's approval 'is my year. I am going to do it'. She started a 1 year A level
(A Eng / A Psy / A Gen Studies) to prepare for HE. Early excuses for absence included also having to pick up children from school; her husband throwing her and the children out: her husband's tests for a malignant illness; the celebration when the tests were clear. Finally she stopped attending and did not respond to correspondence. I bumped into
her by accident in January and she gave, as an excuse, her father's illness. 'I told my mother-in-law to ring you. Didn't she? Oh, well, she has gone a bit' (Gesticulation which implied 'dotty'.) One of the last excuses before leaving in November was as follows: 'I had to take the guinea pig to the vet. It was attacked by the rabbit. I thing it's got
a broken back!!!' (p.s the guinea pig died)

AT RISK ANALYSIS

Tutor's Name _____

Course Programme _____

1. How many students were in your tutorial group at the start of the academic year?

2. In total how many students had withdrawn by the end of the course?

3. How many students did you identify as being 'at risk'?

4. How many students who were classified 'at risk':

i. withdrew completely?

ii reduced their programmes?

5. How many 'at risk' students completed their full programmes?

6. How many students who were not classified as 'at risk':

i. withdrew completely?

ii reduced their programmes?

Please complete the analysis of reasons for leaving by ALL members of your group (Form 5) and then answer question 7.

7. In total how many of your students left for:

i. college-based reasons?

ii. external reasons?

iii. other reasons

8. Comments/explanations of the above trends.

REASON FOR LEAVING - FEFC CATEGORIES

Course Programme

College based reasons	No. of Students
Already covered work	
Disliked course content	
Course not related to plans	
Misunderstood course	
No right qualification	
Not satisfied with course	
Took on too much	
Other course reasons	
Transfer to a different course	
Course too hard	

External reasons	No. of Students
Joined Armed Forces	
Changed Job (inc Promotion)	
Chose an employment scheme	
Employer withdrew support	
Financial reasons	
Illness	
Lost job	
Moved from area	
Other family / personal reasons	
Became self employed	
Started a job	

Other reasons	No. of Students
Early completion	
Asked to leave by College	
Unable to obtain a reason	
Deceased	

Total	
-------	--

REASONS FOR NOT LEAVING COLLEGE!

The College is keen to make sure that students enjoy their time at College and achieve their aims. It is unfortunately the case that some students leave their programmes early without telling us why. We would have preferred to find out if the student had been experiencing some difficulties, as we would like to try to help solve problems as they arise. However, there are some students who experience all sorts of difficulties but still stay on at College to complete their qualifications.

I would like to find out from you if you have ever considered leaving the College and, if so, what was it that helped you to stay on. When I have collected this information I can recommend that appropriate action is taken which may help other students stay to achieve their goals. Any information which you provide will remain strictly confidential and your name will not be used in any analysis of the data. However, your name is requested in order to check that all students have completed this survey.

Could you therefore complete the following questions to help me?

- 1. Your name _____
- 2. Your course _____
- 3. Have you ever considered leaving College before finishing your programme? Yes ☐ No ☐

If the answer to question 3 was 'no' please go straight to question 5.

- 4. If the answer to question 3 was 'yes' could you please state the main reason(s) that may have caused you to leave early.
.....
.....
.....
- 5. Please explain what it was that helped/persuaded you to stay (continue overleaf if necessary)
.....
.....
.....

Many thanks for your help. The information you have given may help someone else to stay on to complete his/her qualification.

Appendix 3

Summaries of the life histories of the biographical interviewees

Summaries of the life histories of the biographical interviewees

This appendix contains summaries of the life history accounts provided by the 14 biographical interviewees. They have been separated initially into leavers and completers and are then listed by academic programme. The order in which they are presented matches that of the summary chart in Figure 3.1 on page 38.

The early leavers

Laura

Deemed to be 'at risk' due to complications resulting from her family responsibilities, Laura left her AS/A Level course approximately half way through her second year. Having been pregnant with her first child before she took her GCSEs at school, she had moved to the FE college at the age of 16 but had dropped out of a Business Administration course because her mother could no longer look after Laura's child due to her own pregnancy. By the time Laura had reached the age of 21, she had two more children and had worked in a series of low-paid, part-time jobs. She decided that she had got into a rut and needed further qualifications because she wanted to be 'up there with the middle classes and didn't want to be just an employment statistic.' Her intention to become a primary teacher had been inspired by meeting one of her children's teachers who had only entered the profession at the age of 40 after bringing up a family.

Having passed two AS Levels in her first year, she began to miss an increasing number of lessons at the start of her second year. These absences were attributed to the difficulties she was encountering with the disturbed behaviour of her youngest daughter, who suffered from a psychological disability caused by a missing chromosome. Her condition meant that Laura's attempts to study were continually disrupted by a child who rarely slept for more than a few hours and had been diagnosed as having self-harming potential. As the child's behaviour became more challenging, Laura had been required to miss college sessions in order to take her for a wide

range of medical investigations. In her final interview Laura indicated that she had dropped out because she could no longer maintain the minimum level of attendance required by the college to qualify for financial support to meet the costs of child care. Nevertheless, it was her intention to return to the same course in the following academic year because she had arranged a pre-school place for her youngest daughter.

On first impression this narrative account seemed to be persuasive, but conversations with Laura's personal tutor, and with the member of the Student Services Department who arranged the financial support, presented a different interpretation. The financial support for child care had been unusually generous in that, in order to secure the continuity of care in a nursery which was equipped to cater for her daughter's needs, the college had sanctioned payments for whole summer holiday period in addition to the full working week during the term. The only requirements made by the college had been for Laura to furnish the Student Services Department with details of her daughter's medical appointments which would prevent her from attending her course. Laura had failed to supply this information and further investigation had revealed that the child had been at the nursery on a number of occasions when Laura had missed college sessions but had claimed that she had taken the child to a hospital appointment. Laura had also omitted from her narrative some key changes in her personal life which might have had an impact on her priorities. During the summer period between the first and second year of her course she had acquired a new boyfriend, an event which prompted her personal tutor to suggest that Laura's commitment to her course might not have been as strong as she suggested. Significantly, Laura failed to honour her promise to return to her course in the subsequent year.

Matt

Matt had been placed on the 'at risk' file because he had been a late enrolment and seemed unclear about his reason for joining the course. Although Matt achieved passes in all three of his AS Level subjects at the end of his first year, he had decided to continue only with Media Studies at A Level and to drop out of Business Studies and General Studies. This decision was made despite any change in his general aim to move into

higher education, his relationship with his subject tutors or in his part-time employment conditions. As he would require at least two A Levels to achieve his ambition of progressing to a Media Studies degree, he was asked about his rationale for withdrawing from two subjects. His response was that, despite his examination success, he was no longer particularly interested in the other subjects and seemed unconcerned that by dropping these elements of his programme of study he would no longer be able to satisfy the entry requirements for a degree. When asked whether he had an alternative career aim he indicated that he had 'not really thought about it.' However, in a previous interview he had indicated that 'if the right full-time job came up I would take it, but I wouldn't take just any job.'

It is in puzzling situations such as this case where biographical interviews can offer some valuable insights. By examining evidence gathered in previous interviews, a possible explanation of this apparently illogical decision can be constructed. Matt's educational record since leaving school had included an Intermediate GNVQ in Engineering, which he had only completed because he received a weekly attendance payment from the funding agency. He declared that he was not concerned that he had failed the course because he had no real interest in the subject and had taken it because his father thought it would lead to a job. After a brief appearance on a GNVQ Business course, which his father also thought might be useful, he then switched to AS Levels several weeks after the course had started because he did not like the content of the Business course. During his second term on the AS Level course he dropped English Language as he found it too theoretical, although he had no complaints about the quality of teaching he had received. He also admitted that he had been fortunate to pass his favourite subject, AS Level Media Studies, because he had been drinking heavily with his friends on the night before the examination and had overslept. After his tutor had contacted his mother when he had missed the start of the examination, he arrived late and took the examination while suffering with a severe hangover and passed only because his tutor had managed to predict the main questions on the paper.

Throughout this period his mother had wanted him to find a job 'because it was about time he paid something towards his keep' To appease her he had

taken a part-time job in the evenings and paid his mother £20 per week. However, his father had vacillated between suggesting that he look for a job and recommending that he should stay in education but change direction yet again to take 'something with IT in it because his mate worked in that area and had told him that there were good jobs if you had a qualification in that subject.' Therefore, his father approved of his decision to continue the link with Business Studies by taking an AS Level in it, but criticised his decision to study Media Studies because it 'wouldn't lead to a job.' It is notable that his father had been shocked by his decision to drop two of his AS Level subjects and had only heard about it as the result of a casual question about his college commitments on Matt's return from two weeks holiday, which had also clashed with the first two weeks of the new term at the start of his second year.

A number of issues appear to surface in Matt's biographical account. His parents' conflicting advice and limited knowledge of both career and educational opportunities appears to betray a lack of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1977). Significantly, neither had studied beyond the minimum school leaving age. Matt described his dilemma as follows:

'My mum wants to put me in any job just to bring money home, whereas my dad wants me to have a career. I think they are both right in their own way—I do need money whatever I do, but I agree with my dad more because of the career aspect. I don't want to end up like my dad in the factory.'

Matt's record also demonstrates a number of 'sudden transformations' which resemble the apparently whimsical changes of direction made by the 16-18 year old students in Bloomer and Hodgkinson's (1997,1999) study of the transition from school to FE. This uncertainty and confusion were apparent when Matt indicated that 'I haven't got a clue what I want to do which is why I keep changing subjects.' Moreover, his acknowledgement in an early interview that he was 'waiting for the right job to come up' also suggests that he belongs to the 'opportunist' category (Page 1996) of students who stay on a course until a 'better' opportunity appears. Similarly, there is a suggestion of the 'choice avoiders' or 'unstable choosers' (Ball et

al.1998), who drift into post 16 education because opportunities for employment are not immediately available in the local labour market. Nevertheless, the factor which finally triggered his decision to leave was his desire to move out of his family home to share a rented flat with his first serious girlfriend. His part-time income was insufficient to pay for the flat, with the result that he took 'a temporary dead-end job which is very boring but easy' and was about to apply for entry to the police because he 'wanted to be dealing with different things each day.'

Amanda

Amanda was judged to be 'at risk' because she had withdrawn from the same course during the previous year and her explanation for that earlier withdrawal, which is shown as the second example of 'Form 3' of Appendix 2, had been used to illustrate the 'at risk' procedure. Her biography revealed that her life had been shaped by a number of medical and financial difficulties. Placed in foster care at the age of 13, she became pregnant by the time she was 16 and was married shortly afterwards. After she had given birth to her second child she was placed under the supervision of a Community Psychiatric Nurse (CPN) because she was diagnosed as having depression with bipolar tendencies and had threatened to harm her children. Shortly before she had withdrawn from her course on the previous occasion she had begun to look after her younger brother while her father spent an extended period in hospital due to renal failure. Then, on rejoining her course, she faced financial difficulties resulting from her separation from her husband. To overcome this problem she financed herself by organising parties to sell a brand of female underwear and had persuaded a male friend to pretend that he was living with her so that she could claim family credit.

Following lengthy absences during the first year, her tutors prepared her for the AS Level examinations by providing individual revision lessons which helped her to achieve grades A, B and C. This success encouraged her to apply for entry to a Classics degree, but shortly afterwards she left her A Level course suddenly, following a dispute with her neighbour which involved painting his lawn white in retaliation for an earlier violent disagreement. After being arrested by the police and examined by a doctor

she was released on the condition that she was required to take antidepressants under the supervision of her CPN. Immediately after this episode, when she attended her penultimate biographical interview, she insisted that she was 'absolutely certain' that she would finish her course, but then left on the following day. During her final interview six months later she explained that she had 'fallen into a depression after being on a high and couldn't even go out of the house.' When she had recovered she obtained a job selling adverts in a 'charity' publication 'for a rather dodgy publisher' and hoped to take her degree on a day-release basis.

The Completers

The AS/A Level programme

Joanne

While Joanne's life history is less colourful, she shares with Amanda a history of having dropped out previously, as shown by the first example recorded on 'Form 3' of Appendix 2. The biographical interviews revealed that this withdrawal was the third occasion on which she had failed to complete a course. Having started a resit GCSE course three times before finally completing, she then dropped out of her first A Level course, but returned, completed her programme and progressed to primary education degree course at a local HE college. Her description of her educational career included a history of bullying throughout her secondary schooling, an unsympathetic reaction from her teachers and a negative assessment of her prospects by her careers adviser who suggested that she 'had no hope' of achieving her ambition to be a teacher. The difficulties resulting from this experience were compounded by frequent asthma attacks.

In her final interview one year after she had progressed to her degree course, Joanne indicated that her success in finally completing her FE courses after so many false starts was due to the support and patience of her English tutor and to the fact that the college was prepared to risk further damage to its performance indicators if she dropped out again. She then indicated that she was considering whether to leave her HE college because her new lecturers had been far less supportive than her FE tutor. She was particularly unhappy that, having been off for five weeks with a chest infection, during which she

had been 'really ill for three weeks and then two weeks coughing and not sleeping properly', staff at her teaching placement had complained to the college and had forced her to return 'before she was ready.' Joanne's educational history and expectations illustrate the dilemma facing an FE college which is trying to widen participation and support episodes of 'interrupted learning' caused by external factors.

James

James, whose chronological account in the opening interview revealed considerable bitterness about the collapse of his parents' marriage when he was a teenager, sought to attribute his chances of educational success to external factors such as luck and/or the quality of teaching. He showed a readiness to blame most of his previous teachers at both school and sixth form college despite acknowledging that during his final two years at secondary school he was frequently caught drinking alcohol during school hours and had been suspended on a number of occasions for smoking in class. In terms of Weiner's (1979) analysis, the apparent absence of internal attribution in his account placed James at risk of withdrawal because he appeared to believe that he has little control over his educational progress.

This reluctance to take responsibility for his own learning continued during his two year A Level course and he failed to meet deadlines frequently. Although he attended classes regularly he remained a rather isolated, unhappy individual who found it difficult to relate other students. His interviews were dominated by reflections on his dissatisfaction with his home life and how it had a negative impact on his course:

'What happens at home definitely has an effect on how I feel about college.'

Occasionally his home life had an unintentionally beneficial effect on his work. To his surprise he gained an A grade in his AS Level General Studies, which he later attributed to a desire to prove a point to his father who, on the day before the examination, had suggested to James that he was not as able as his younger sister. However, this effect was short lived and his work rate declined to the point where he gained the minimum A Level grades required to enter a degree course at a local university.

As his course progressed, James became increasingly dependent on his tutors and the college in general:

‘The college gives me a routine and a reason for getting up—you get used to seeing the same people every day.’

By the time he completed his course his tutors were concerned that he had become so dependent that he would not be able to achieve a successful transition to university and would become an early leaver during the next stage of his educational career.

Paul

Paul was placed on the ‘at risk’ register because of his social isolation within his course group and the recent death of his mother. He had chosen to take an AS/A Level course at the FE college rather than the Sixth Form college because his brothers had both been successful former students and the college had supported one of them through their mother’s illness and death from cancer.

During the biographical interview Paul confirmed that he had no friends at college but indicated that it was his own choice. He also revealed that his involvement in college life was minimal: he had not used the computers in the learning centre or visited the college library since the induction visit. Paul had also refused to comply with the wider requirements of his course by failing to join the Curriculum 2000 enrichment programme, avoiding personal tutorials and missing the majority of his General Studies lessons. He had considered dropping out of the course during the first term because the pressure of work was greater than he had encountered at school when he took his GCSEs, but, due to family encouragement, he had stayed. Nevertheless, he did drop AS Level Biology as he did not like the content.

However, the content of another of his subjects forced him to reduce his self-imposed isolation. The coursework assignment in Media Studies required him to participate in group work and, to his surprise, he found that he enjoyed it because ‘I entered into conversation a lot more with the other students and it boosted my confidence.’ After revising for only two days he passed his AS Levels, progressed into the second year of the programme and ultimately completed his A Levels successfully.

Diane

After gaining 11 GCSEs, Diane had entered her school's sixth form to study A Levels but 'on an impulse' had dropped out to work as a nanny in Switzerland. On her return to England she met her first partner and had a child. This relationship did not last and she met her second partner at work. When she found that she was pregnant with her second child they decided to get married but her partner left her two months before she gave birth. This event proved to be a turning point because Diane decided to escape from the tedium of a repetitive administrative job, where her promotion 'had been blocked by middle-aged male managers', by joining the Access to HE course in order to gain a place on an art degree and to teach in a secondary school.

In the initial biographical interview Diane emphasised her determination to complete the Access course because it represented a fresh start. However, later interviews revealed a series of difficulties in her personal life which challenged her resolve. After her husband left her, she moved with her two children into her mother's house and applied to be placed on the already lengthy council house waiting list. She found it difficult to study because her mother thought that Diane should concentrate on looking after her children rather than working on the course, and the three-bedroomed house became very overcrowded when her divorced brother and his three children stayed at weekends. An attempted reconciliation with her husband was unsuccessful and was followed by a very acrimonious divorce. Despite facing further problems, including the theft and destruction of her car by vandals and her former husband's decision to initiate divorce proceedings only two weeks before her examinations, Diane had set her heart on qualifying for a place she had been offered by a local HE college.

Unfortunately, as the next interview indicated, Diane's plan was thwarted at the last minute. Her sister-in-law's failure to honour a promise to look after Diane's children prevented her from attending her first examination and she only managed to take her Psychology paper when her personal tutor

collected the children and kept them in the college staffroom. Diane intends to return in 12 months to take the examination because she believes that 'if I can do this course, I can do anything.'

Helen

Like Diane, Helen gained 11 GCSEs at school and dropped out of an A Level course at the age of 16 to start a full-time job because, and having been brought up by a single parent, household finances were tight. Having married, had a child and then separated she had become disillusioned with an unfulfilling job and had joined the Access course with the aim of becoming a Mathematics teacher. She saw this step as a way of 'setting a standard for her family- something they could be proud of.'

Helen was judged by her tutor to be 'at risk' of early leaving because she appeared to have financial problems and her child's complicated medical history was likely to result in a number of lengthy absences. Her son had been born with a malformed bladder which had already required several operations and he was also currently suffering from repeated bouts of impetigo. As the latter is highly contagious, Helen was unable to leave him in the company of other children and within the first term had to miss lengthy periods of the course to care for him.

Despite these problems, Helen applied for a degree place at one of the two local universities 'because it was on a good bus route.' She explained that her determination to succeed was partly influenced by an episode some years earlier when her ex-husband had insisted that she should abandon a Beauty Therapy course after five months as he did not want her to progress in an independent career. Helen also acknowledged the continuing encouragement of two middle class friends and the support of her current college tutor who had been very flexible with deadlines and had provided individual tuition to cover the work she had missed. Her financial problems had also been eased by a significant payment made towards her child care costs from the funds administered by the college's Student Services Department, and, in an observation which could inform the college's tutorial strategies, Helen identified her involvement in the biographical interviews as being an unexpected source of support as 'they had helped her to think

through her priorities.' Although her ex-husband had refused to help with child care during her Access examinations she managed to complete the course successfully and had decided to take up a place on a degree at a local HE college because the entry requirement was lower than that of the university and 'a degree is a degree wherever it comes from.'

Sandra

Sandra's domestic situation was similar to that of Diane and Helen. She was a single parent whose husband had left her and she saw the Access course as a means of escaping from a series of low paid jobs with no prospects. Before her husband had left, Sandra had attempted to join an HND course but he had refused to support her because 'he did not want me to get ahead of him.' Her ambition was to take a law degree and she praised the quality of the college's initial guidance and counselling that had helped to place her on the Access programme rather than the NVQ-based Business Administration programme for which she had originally applied.

She was categorised as being 'at risk' because her husband was not providing any financial support for their three children and, even from the start of the course, Sandra was frequently absent because she had to take her eldest son to hospital for regular tests. To support her, the college paid for child care and her tutor relaxed the minimum attendance requirement of 80%. Despite this support she had considered dropping out after her credibility with her tutor had been undermined temporarily by another member of the course group who claimed that Sandra had fabricated the reason for her frequent absences and was malingering. The malicious nature of these accusations was revealed to her only towards the end of the course when two other students approached her and advised her to inform both her tutor and her biographical interviewer that she had been the victim of an unusual form of bullying by another adult.

Sandra attributed her decision to complete the programme primarily to the sense of achievement she gained from the course. She also acknowledged the importance of the college's financial support, the patience shown by her tutor and the encouragement of an older female friend who had no

connection with the college. Sandra has now started a degree course at a local university.

Anne

In common with the other three members of the cohort of biographical interviewees drawn from the Access programme, Anne had joined the course to seek a more fulfilling career. Previously, she had worked for seven years in a retail call centre and had experienced considerable stress when she had been rebuked frequently by her supervisor for allowing lonely elderly callers to extend the conversation beyond the time permitted by the company's efficiency targets. Her decision to leave the job was a turning point because it was the first time she had left a post voluntarily, having worked for 20 years since dropping out of a Business Administration course at the age of 16 when her work placement had offered her a full-time post.

However, in several respects Anne differed from the other Access students. She had a stable marriage and her husband, who fully supported her decision to join the course, was prepared to care for their children whenever she needed quiet study time at home. She was also the only member of the Access cohort who did not have a clear aim at the end of the course, and it was this factor, combined with a severe lack of confidence in her own ability, that resulted in Anne being designated 'at risk' by her tutor.

During the interviews she revealed that her lack of confidence had led her to consider leaving the Access course shortly before the deadline for the submission of the first assignment. She had stayed only due to her husband's support and because she wanted to set a positive example to her children. Anne also provided a detailed explanation of the destructive tensions which developed between students in groups where cliques existed. She indicated that she had deliberately brought this information to the biographical interviews because she felt that the tensions could intimidate some students to such an extent that they might leave, and she believed that the causes of such divisions within groups were often not apparent to tutors in the early stages of a course.

By the end of the course she had gained sufficient confidence to undertake further training as a basic skills tutor and was considering a career in teaching. She attributed her newly found confidence to the sense of achievement she had experienced and commented that she was 'proud of myself because at the start of the year I was convinced that I would pack it in.'

The GCSE programme

Jenny

Jenny's history of disrupted schooling and previous drop-out, together with a considerable degree of confusion about her career aims, led to her inclusion on the 'at risk' register. Her mother's attack on one of Jenny's primary school teachers, in which the victim received a broken jaw, began a process which resulted her increasingly erratic attendance at a total of seven schools and her failure to be entered for GCSE examinations. The subsequent death of her mother had left Jenny in the care of a father who was 'a caveman who didn't believe that women needed an education.'

She had dropped out of her first attempt at the college's two-year GCSE course because she 'didn't know anyone and felt awkward'. However, when she re-enrolled for the same course in the following year she developed friendships within her course group and remarked that the difference between school and college is that 'people like me now, I've got mates and I don't get bullied.' Her aim seemed to reflect the inter-generational shift in attitudes noted by Sharpe (1976, 1994) in her two studies of young women. For Jenny a career rather marriage was the priority. Nevertheless, the form that her career would take changed with each interview, a trend which was consistent with the 'sudden transformations' identified by Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997, 1999). Initially Jenny wanted to work in a zoo after watching a natural history programme when she had been in hospital, but by the second interview her aim had changed to establishing and writing for an animal rights magazine after she had become involved in a protest group which campaigned about that issue. In later interviews this aim had changed to working as a

counsellor after observing the breakdown of her sister's marriage to a violent partner.

Although Jenny indicated that she had completed her current course because her father and others had called her a drop-out in the past and she 'wanted to prove them wrong', her frequent reference to the importance of friendship suggested that a sense of acceptance was the crucial factor which encouraged her to achieve a successful educational outcome for the first time. The emphasis which Jenny placed on the value of friendship was further illustrated when she indicated that she was particularly pleased that her closest friend on the course, Rachel, had asked their course tutor for reassurance that they would be in the same group when they enrolled for their new programme in the following academic year.

Rachel

The impact on retention of mutually reinforcing benefit of friendship was also evident in the case of Jenny's friend Rachel, who was 'at risk' because she had arrived at college with a history of poor attendance at secondary school. During her final two years at school she had attended for approximately six weeks, and in her first term on the two-year GCSE course Rachel was regularly absent. She indicated that she found theory boring and didn't like 'sitting behind desks' but preferred 'to do practical things and seriously thought about giving up.'

Rachel's decision to stay and complete the course appears to have been influenced by a range of factors. Her friendship with a number of youth workers, which had begun while she was at school, had encouraged her to show considerable initiative in helping them to establish a club for 11 to 13 year olds. She had been given responsibility for booking the accommodation, designing the publicity leaflets and devising activities that would interest young people. Having completed 200 hours of voluntary work, Rachel had gained a Millennium Volunteer's Certificate and the youth workers who had inspired this success also encouraged her to stay at college: 'they've supported me and they're always there for me if I need them.' By contrast, she felt that the influence of her family was diminishing:

'I don't really talk to them much and I've grown apart from my mum.' This was also reflected in her future plans, where her career was more important than family and marriage:

'I'm not bothered if I end up on my own. I just want to be happy with what I've done in life—at what I've achieved.'

With this in mind, and to further her career aim of entering the police force, she volunteered to work at the 2002 Commonwealth Games as a travel operation assistant.

In addition to the external influences on Rachel's decision to complete her course, she also identified some college-based factors. When comparing college to school she felt that 'the teachers are better—they treat you as the age you are and you give them more respect in return.' She also valued the supportive friendships she had made at college and indicated that they compensated for the less attractive features of the college experience: 'some days the course is boring but I don't mind because I really like the group.' Once she had made the decision to stay after the first term she found to her surprise that her attendance improved and she even began to enjoy a sense of achievement from 'getting the work done.'

Michelle

Having been educated by her mother at home since she was 13 after she had been a member of a special needs group which had been bullied at school, Michelle displayed a high level of anxiety at the prospect of working with other students on her college course and consequently had been placed on the 'at risk' register even before she had attended her first session on the two-year GCSE programme. Her initial refusal at college to consider taking examinations also led her tutors to suspect that her parents had been 'over protective'. As a result of these factors, her tutors were very pessimistic about the probability of Michelle completing the course.

During her first biographical interview their fears appeared to be justified when Michelle revealed that she was unsure as to whether she should continue because she felt under pressure and had found it difficult to cope

with the rate of work set by her tutors. When she had received tuition at home her mother had allowed her to set her own pace.

However, a significant change was apparent in later interviews. Michelle had made rapid progress in English, the subject which previously she had found most challenging, and had been persuaded by her tutors to enter for her GCSE examinations. She had also revised her priorities and now wanted to develop a career before having a family because, on reflection, she felt that her mother 'had not a life of her own until the last five years.' She attributed these changes to a growth in confidence inspired by supportive tutors and to the experience of mixing with other students and listening to their views. After the final interview she gained passes in GCSE English and History and had started AS Level Ancient History with the intention of seeking employment in a museum.

Mike

Mike had been placed on the 'at risk' register because he had arrived at the college with low attainment in his GCSEs and a record of numerous periods of absence from school due to illness and family problems. His mother, who was divorced from his father, had given birth to Mike when she was 17 and had a history of severe depression. She had threatened to commit suicide on a number of occasions and was under the care of a psychiatrist. Tensions had built up in the home to such an extent that both Mike and his sister were being monitored by social workers when he started his college course, and he had been prescribed anti-depressants in order to cope with his mother's self-harming behaviour.

To the frustration of the tutor who had been conspicuously successful in helping Michelle to make rapid progress in English, Mike failed to meet coursework deadlines and could not be entered for that subject. Although he was entered for the examination in several other subjects he did not achieve GCSE pass grades.

However, Mike did make significant progress in other respects. When asked why he had completed a course which had proved so challenging he indicated that he saw the college as a means 'of getting out of the house and

being independent, living a life of my own.' He also wanted 'to prove to my mum that I'm not like my dad who she thinks is a nobody.' On reflection he felt that attending college had encouraged him 'to act grown up because there are older people in the group and some are paying.' This had helped him 'to manage his anger at home' and as a result he was no longer under the supervision of a social worker. Mike had also sought and acted upon the advice of staff in the college's Student Services Department who suggested that moving to live with his grandmother might help him to acquire a degree of independence within a supportive setting.

Despite his disappointing GCSE results he returned to college in the following year and joined a Basic Engineering Foundation course and asked if he could continue with the biographical interviews because he found them both interesting and revealing. For Mike, and for some of the other students, the interviews had developed into an opportunity for regular reflection about his life and were no longer merely a research exercise.